

## Smile, You're Speaking Emoji

ADAM STERNBERGH

Journalist and novelist Adam Sternbergh was born and raised in Toronto. He is a long-time contributing editor to *New York Magazine* and the former culture editor of *The New York Times Magazine*. His nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *EQ*, *Bloomberg Business Week*, *The Independent on Sunday*, and other publications. His novels are *Shovel Ready* (2014), *Near Enemy* (2015), and *The Birds* (2017). Known for its distinctive literary style, much of his fiction combines elements of the science fiction, noir, and thriller genres.

By his own account, Sternbergh has always found language fascinating. “As a kid, I was always intrigued by the power of words—especially two words placed in juxtaposition,” he once noted in an interview. “The shortest Bible verse, famously, is ‘Jesus wept,’ which is a really enviable model of literary economy. In the modern world, I absolutely love Twitter and the brevity it forces on you.” In the essay that follows, which is excerpted from an article that originally appeared in *New York Magazine* in 2014, Sternbergh analyzes an even more condensed and economic mode of expression: the emoji. While some find emoji silly or annoying, he views them as a whole vocabulary to themselves, one that is well-suited to complex, contemporary communication.

**WRITING TO DISCOVER:** How and when do you use emoji in your communications? Are there specific ones that you use more often than others? What are they good at communicating? What, if anything, do you find difficult or impossible to say with emoji alone?

Consider the exclamation point. For much of its history, the exclamation point had a fairly simple usage: to straightforwardly and sincerely indicate excitement or, if included in a quotation, vehemence or volume. (“Get off my lawn!” as opposed to “Get off my lawn.”) Yet for a long time, circa the mid-1990s, it seemed linguistically and socially impossible to use an exclamation point unironically. I’ll anchor this observation to Peter Bagge’s landmark grunge-culture comic *Hate!*, which debuted in 1990, simply titled *Hate!*, but which added the telltale exclamation point to its name at issue No. 16 in 1994. I’ll also add, from personal recollection, that if you included an exclamatory phrase such as “I’m so excited!” or “See you tonight!” in any written electronic correspondence up to, say, 1999, you could reliably assume it would be read as the punctational equivalent of a smirk.

That was how my generation came to use the exclamation point, anyway. More recently, with the advent of new forms such as tweets and text messaging, the exclamation point has reverted to something closer to its original meaning. In fact, it’s more or less switched places with the period, so that “I’m excited

to see you!” now conveys sincere excitement to see you, while “I’m excited to see you.” seems, on a screen at least, to imply the opposite. The exclamation point, once so sprightly and forceful, has come, according to Ben Yagoda in a piece in the *New York Times*, to signify “minimally acceptable enthusiasm.”

All this fluidity means that it’s very hard to keep up—it’s what the writer Emily Gould described to a friend as the “arms race of communication styling that led me to feel that sometimes only one exclamation point seems unenthusiastic or even downright sarcastic.” She was, in part, explaining her attraction to emoji—which, she wrote, “make it easier to talk about anything, I think!”

Her friend Phoebe Connelly had texted her about engagement rings—a fraught subject Connelly often addressed her engagement using emoji: the Heart ❤️, the Diamond 💎, the Diamond Ring 💍, the Wedding Cake 🍰, the Party Starters 🎉. (Weirdly, though, not the Bride With Veil 👰, the most obviously wedding-related emoji, which she avoided for reasons she can’t quite explain, even to herself.) “Emoji,” Connelly wrote in an article for the *Woman* magazine special emoji issue, “allow me an ironic space within the dreaded cheery sincerity of being engaged. I can emoji diamond rings; therefore, it is ok that yes, I have a diamond ring. I default to emoji, a safe argot, as a means of discussing a marriage I’m emotionally ready for, but still lack the language to describe.”

When I first encountered emoji, I assumed they were used only ironically—perhaps because, as a member of Generation X, I am accustomed to irony as a default communicative mode. And it’s certainly true that emoji have proved popular, unsurprisingly, with early adopters and techno-fetishists and people with trend-sensitive antennae—the kinds of people who might, for example, download a Japanese app to “force” their iPhone to reveal a hidden emoji keyboard. But emoji have also proved to be popular with the least techno-literate and ironic among us, i.e., our parents. Many people I spoke to relayed that their moms were the most enthusiastic adopters of emoji they knew. One woman said that her near-daily text-message-based interaction with her mother consists almost entirely of strings of emoji hearts. Another woman, with a septuagenarian mother, revealed to me that her mom had recently sent a text relaying regret, followed by a crying-face emoji—and that this was possibly the most straightforwardly emotional sentiment her mother had ever expressed to her.

And now we’re getting to the heart of what emoji do well—what perhaps they do better even than language itself, at least in the rough-and-tumble world online. Aside from the widespread difficulty of expressing yourself in real time with your clumsy thumbs, while hunched over a lit screen, and probably distracted by 50 other things, there’s the fact that the internet is mean. The widespread anonymity of the web has marked its nascent years with a kind of insidious indelicacy that we all now accept with resignation. Comment sections are a write-off. “Roll” is a new and unwelcome subspecies of person. Twitter’s a hashtag-strewn battlefield.



But emoji are not, it turns out, well designed to convey meanness.

They are cartoons, first of all. And the emoji that exist—while very useful for conveying excitement, happiness, bemusement, befuddlement, and even love—are not very good at conveying anger, derision, or hate. If we can take as a given that millennials, as a generation, were raised in a digital environment—navigating, for the first time, digital relationships as an equally legitimate and in some ways dominant form of interpersonal interaction—it stands to reason

**Emoji's default implication isn't irony; its default is sincerity, but sincerity that's self-aware.** they might be drawn to a communicative tool that serves as an antidote to ambient incivility. They might be especially receptive to, and even

excited about, a tool that counteracts the harshness of life in the online world. They might be taken with emoji.

The word that came up multiple times, in many conversations, with many people about emoji was *soften*.

"The thing it does is soften things," says Tyler Schnoebelen, the linguistics expert.

"I use emoji in personal emails all the time, because I feel like I'm softening the email," says Vulture's Lindsey Weber, who co-curated the "Emoji" art show.

Alice Robb, who is in her 20s, wrote in *The New Republic* about saying good-bye to a friend who was moving across the country via text message. "I texted her an emoji of a crying face. She replied with an image of a chick with its arms outstretched. This exchange might have been heart-felt. It could have been ironic. I'm still not really sure. It's possible that this friend and I are particularly emotionally stunted, but I put at least part of the blame on emoji: They allowed us to communicate without saying anything, saving us from spelling out any actual sentiments." And yet what's striking is that her whole story is full of actual sentiment—she is no doubt sad that her friend is leaving, and her friend is no doubt sad to be leaving. Adding an emoji to a message doesn't undercut those sentiments (as irony would) but rather says, "I mean this, but it's hard to say it, and I know it's hard, but that makes it no less true." Emoji's default implication isn't irony; its default is sincerity, but sincerity that's self-aware. If the ironic exclamation point was the signature punctuation flourish of Generation X, the emoji—that attempt to bridge the difficult gap between what we feel and what we intend and what we say and what we text—is the signature punctuation flourish of the millennials.

"There really are no negative or mean emoji," says Weber. "There's no violent or aggressive emoji. Even the angry faces are hilarious or silly." Sure, there's a pistol emoji. But imagine sending a death threat using Pistol and Angry Face 🖊️. If it's possible to "soften" a death threat, emoji would do it.

It's frankly pretty strange that, in an online climate that is constantly being called out for excessive aggression and maliciousness, emoji have

no in-built linguistic capacity for meanness. There are angry faces and frowning faces and thumbs down and even the so-called Face With No Good Gesture, which, in the Apple set, is a woman with her arms crossed in an X. But, seriously, look at her: 🙄. The Face With No Good Gesture has never actually hurt someone's feelings. One of the many new official emoji being added as part of Unicode 7 is a raised middle finger—like all the new emoji, it's simply being added because it's part of the Wingdings font. At first glance, it seems pretty surly, especially for an emoji. But as an expression of aggression, it's harmless. If the worst that online trolls could do was send you an endless string of raised-middle-finger emoji, I think we'd all agree that we'd be living in a better world.

Consider the Smiling Face With Smiling Eyes 😊. Right now, on Twitter, Smile is being used 157,439,872 times. Popularity-wise, that ranks it as No. 8. Here are a few other popular ones: Face Savoring Delicious Food 🍔, Disappointed but Relieved 😞, Man and Woman Holding Hands 🤝, Baby 🍼, Face Throwing a Kiss 🍷, Person Raising Both Hands in Celebration 🙌, Okay Hand Sign 🙆, Thumbs Up 👍.

In 1974, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Transportation, designed a new system of symbols to be used in airports around the world in response to the increase in global travel. The 34 symbols it came up with include such undeniably resilient icons as Man Hailing Taxi, Diapered Baby, and the Suitcase symbol, which still direct people to taxi stands, changing tables, and luggage carousels around the world. But the design committee also made the following deduction: "We are convinced that the effectiveness of symbols is strictly limited." Symbols, they found, could only augment language, not replace it.

It's improbable that the Smiling Face With Smiling Eyes is a permanent addition to our language; a cartoon smiling face is just about the crudest method possible to convey to someone "I'm happy." And yet here we are. As Mimi Ito, a cultural anthropologist at UC Irvine, explains, "when people are given the capacity to communicate in these ways, they're picking them up and developing whole new forms of literacy."

For now, emoji does the job. We are more connected than ever—what Ito terms a state of "ambient pervasive communication"—and we need to know that our connections are not being misunderstood. We need to let people know, even people very far away, staring at a screen, that we're happy. Or confused. Or joking. Or missing them. Despite the popularity of the "joy" symbol, emoji are not solely being used to convey joy. My friend (the one with the crying-emoji-sending mother) sent me a combo friend (the one with the grinning face with smiling eyes) pointed to its head 😊. (Taken together, they read as "stress," which is particularly useful in New York.) One of my favorite emoji usages was when I asked online whether anyone could give me an emoji-only review of the VMAs on MTV and someone tweeted, simply, a Hammer emoji poised over a TV Set emoji. This was the most succinct and astute review of the show



that I could find anywhere, which suggests that emoji are coming into their own as a useful linguistic tool.

Fred Benenson, who works at Kickstarter, is even more optimistic about the future of emoji. He should be: He's the guy who, partly as an art project, partly to see if he could, spearheaded the translation of the whole of Moby-Dick into emoji. He also worked with Lawrence Lessig, the Harvard academic who's written extensively on the ways in which apparently apolitical computer coding can influence our laws and even our human rights. So Benenson recognizes that emoji, for all their supposed transience, are an important addition to language, especially now that we do so much communicating online. "The fact that emoji is available in software legitimizes it as a form of human expression," he says. "And especially now—we're so intimate with these devices and we're saying some of our most compelling things to each other in the form of text messages and social media."

In other words, we've stumbled on whole new confusing ways to communicate with each other, so we've been given a whole new vocabulary to say "I'm laughing," or "joy," or "Well done." This new way will not replace all the old ways, but it can augment them and help us muddle through. In all the old ways, but it can augment them and help us muddle through. In lieu of being able to read each other's faces when we say these things, we've developed these surrogate faces. They're simple. They're silly. They don't yet have a taco. But they work, at least a little, at least right now. We blow each other kisses. We smile with hearts in our eyes. We cry tears of joy. We say "I love you," but in a million different ways, each one freighted with the particular meaning we hope fervently to convey, then send them out hope-fully, like a smiley face in a bottle, waiting to be received by the exact person it was intended for, and opened up, and understood completely.

### THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE READING

1. How has the meaning of the exclamation point changed over the last few decades, according to Sternbergh? What factors have contributed to the change?
2. Sternbergh writes that "as a member of Generation X, I am accustomed to irony as a default communicative mode" (5). What is *irony*—and what does it mean in this context? How might irony work as a "communicative mode"? (Glossary: *Irony*)
3. According to many people Sternbergh spoke for in this article, who have been the most enthusiastic adopters of the emoji? Why might that be surprising?
4. What do "emoji do well," in Sternbergh's view (6)? Why is this function so important in the context of the internet and social media? Do you agree with Sternbergh's general characterization of the online world?
5. Paragraph 14 is primarily a list of different emojis. What is the purpose of this paragraph? How does it fit into the essay?
6. Sternbergh cites several different sources, including journalists and academic researchers. Why do you think he does this? How do these specific references support his analysis? Find a specific example and explain how it contributes to the essay.

### LANGUAGE IN ACTION

Sternbergh argues that emoji are effective at clarifying our communication in many situations. But how expressive are they as a language? For this activity, which is a variation on the game "Paper Telephone," you will need to partner with two of your classmates. Write down a simple, declarative sentence that uses common words to make a basic statement about yourself. Here are some example sentences that you might use:

- I am looking forward to going out to a party with my friends this Saturday.
- My favorite food is pizza, my favorite drink is iced tea, and my favorite color is blue.
- I feel sad because my girlfriend broke up with me last weekend.
- I am tired because I stayed up too late last night studying for a test.

Now pass the sentence to a classmate. Keep track of who wrote the original sentence and what the text of the sentence said. Your classmate's task is to translate your sentence into emoji as accurately as possible, through a text message or any other medium that uses emoji. Finally, your classmate should text the emoji sentence to *the third classmate in your group*, whose job is to interpret the sentence. Afterward, discuss with your classmates how effective the emoji were in communicating meaning. What things, ideas, and meanings were the emoji best able to capture? What was most difficult to express with emoji?

### WRITING SUGGESTIONS

1. Sternbergh refers to many different emoji in the essay, especially in paragraph 14. He also discusses the emoji's function and their effects. What emoji do you use the most, and why and how to you use them? Choose three emoji that you commonly use in your day-to-day communications. What do they mean? Why do you use them? How do they help you express your message, convey tone, or communicate meaning? If you rarely use emojis, or do not use them at all, you may use this prompt to explain why you avoid using them.
2. According to Sternbergh, "the internet is mean." He then elaborates: "The widespread anonymity of the web has marked its nascent years with a kind of insidious incivility that we all now accept with resignation. Comment sections are a write-off. 'Troll' is a new and unwelcome subspecies of person. Twitter's a hashtag-strewn battlefield" (6). Do you agree with this generalization about the internet being "mean"? If so, how do you explain or account for that meanness? Do you think Sternbergh identifies the causes accurately? Are there other factors that he does not mention? Alternatively, do you *disagree* with his broad claim? Do you think claims about the overall meanness of the internet are overstated?