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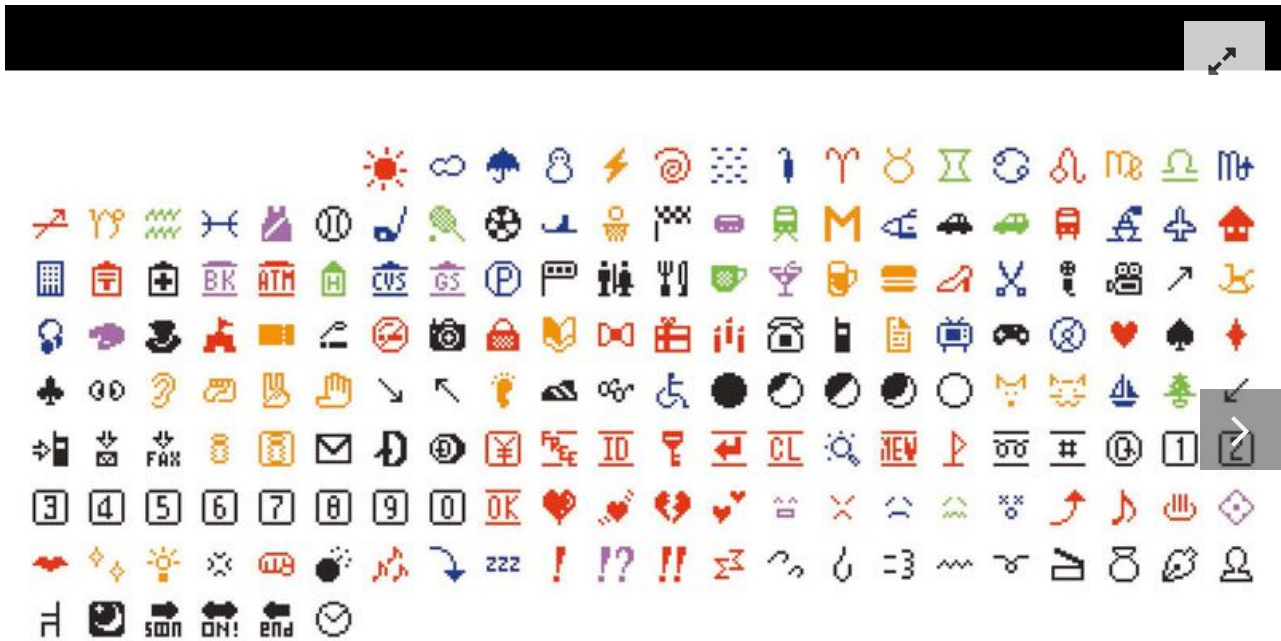
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# Emojis get a big (thumbs-up emoji) from British linguist

By NARA SCHOENBERG  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE | NOV 01, 2017



(Above) Fig 17. Kurita's original inventory of emojis.

## Emojis

The first emojis were developed in the late 1990s, according to "The Emoji Code." Japanese software engineer Shigetaka Kurita and his team came up with 176 emoji characters for use in the world's first mobile-phone internet system. Kurita drew on the Japanese comic-strip tradition Manga, and on infographics, those universal pictorial symbols for, say, "toilets," or "smoking prohibited," that you see in public places. (Picador Publishing)

You've come a long way, smiley face emoji.

You're now officially art, part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, just like the Picassos and the Jackson Pollocks. Your crew has its own movie — aptly titled "The Emoji Movie."

Your image graces pillows and T-shirts; in 2015 an emoji ("face with tears of joy") was Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year.

And yet, we know, there's something missing. In those quiet moments when the crowds stop texting, there's a yearning for what Rodney Dangerfield wanted and Aretha Franklin demanded: a little something called respect.

"There's a lot of prejudice against emoji," said British linguist Vyvyan Evans, author of the recent book "The Emoji Code: The Linguistics Behind Smiley Faces and Scaredy Cats."

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"A lot of people think it's the adolescent equivalent of a grunt."

We talked to Evans, a big fan of those expressive little faces, about a deceptively simple system of symbols that's taken the world by storm in the past few years. The following is an edited transcript.

**Q: You call emojis "the world's global form of communication," which is a pretty strong claim. A lot of people would say English is the global form of communication.**

A: There are around 340 million native speakers of English, around 600 million speakers who use it as a second language, so with English you can reach around a billion people, which is pretty heady stuff. English is the primary or official language in 101 countries, from Canada to Cameroon, from Malta to Malawi. The difference between English and Emoji is Emoji (capitalized to indicate the system of emojis) is intuitively accessible. There are 3.2 billion people who have regular internet access in the world, and studies show that 92 percent-plus of

those 3.2 billion people regularly send emojis. So from that perspective, Emoji leaves English in the dust, in terms of its use and uptake.

**Q: What's the greatest strength of emojis?**

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A: Think about the default mode of communication, which is face-to-face interaction. Most people think that when we communicate in that default mode, language is what's driving effective communication, and in fact it's not. Communication requires different channels of information — language is just one. The two other important ones are paralanguage, and that's how you're delivering the words, so tone of voice, and the really big one is kinesics, and that has to do with action-based, nonverbal communication.

Emoji functions analogously to tone of voice and to body language in text-speak, and without it we're reduced communicators. This gives rise to what I refer to as "the angry jerk phenomenon." Digital communication (can) suck out the empathy of the message and reduce all the nuance, and someone we know to be otherwise calm and sane comes across as a complete, angry-sounding jerk.

**Q: Do emojis have a weakness?**

A: Probably the most significant weakness comes from how it's controlled. It's controlled by Unicode, which is a California-based consortium that was founded in 1988, and this particular organization (provides an international standard for) fonts and scripts, so this is noble and important. The (members include) eight of the North American giants: Adobe, Apple, Google, Microsoft, Facebook, IBM, Oracle and Yahoo. And there are 3 non-North American organizations. These organizations have a number of rules and regulations that govern emoji, and one is that for something to be accepted as a new emoji, it must be iconic in nature, it must be pictographic, so what that means is the thing that does the representing of the idea must look like the idea it's representing.

**Q: Is that a problem?**

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A: The problem is that emoji cannot represent more abstract ideas, because it's limited up front in terms of what the symbols look like or can be. How do you represent feminism using an emoji? You can't. How do you represent iconoclastic? Or memory?

**Q: Is there a censorship issue?**

A: Emoji is potentially on a slippery slope to censorship. This goes back to (Unicode) rules and regulations and, arguably, the political correctness of Unicode, the gatekeeper, which is a force for good, but also in the overzealous interpretation of what is correct and what is good, this can potentially lead to an Orwellian nightmare. I'm not saying that's where we are, (but) just to give you an example, there have been a spate of court cases the last 18 months or so, where people have been arrested for issuing threats of various kinds (in the form of) sending gun emojis. In a case in France last year, a man in his 20s was sentenced to three months in (jail) for sending a gun emoji directed at his ex-girlfriend. What Apple did in its update last year was to change the representation of the gun, which previously was a revolver, to a water pistol, a harmless child's toy. These companies that sit on Unicode, that have shareholders and images they need to protect, are in essence constraining what the world's 3.2 billion internet users are able to use emoji to express.

**Q: What's your favorite emoji?**

A: My favorite is the dancing lady in the red dress.

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**Q: Oh, I like her too. Why do you like her?**

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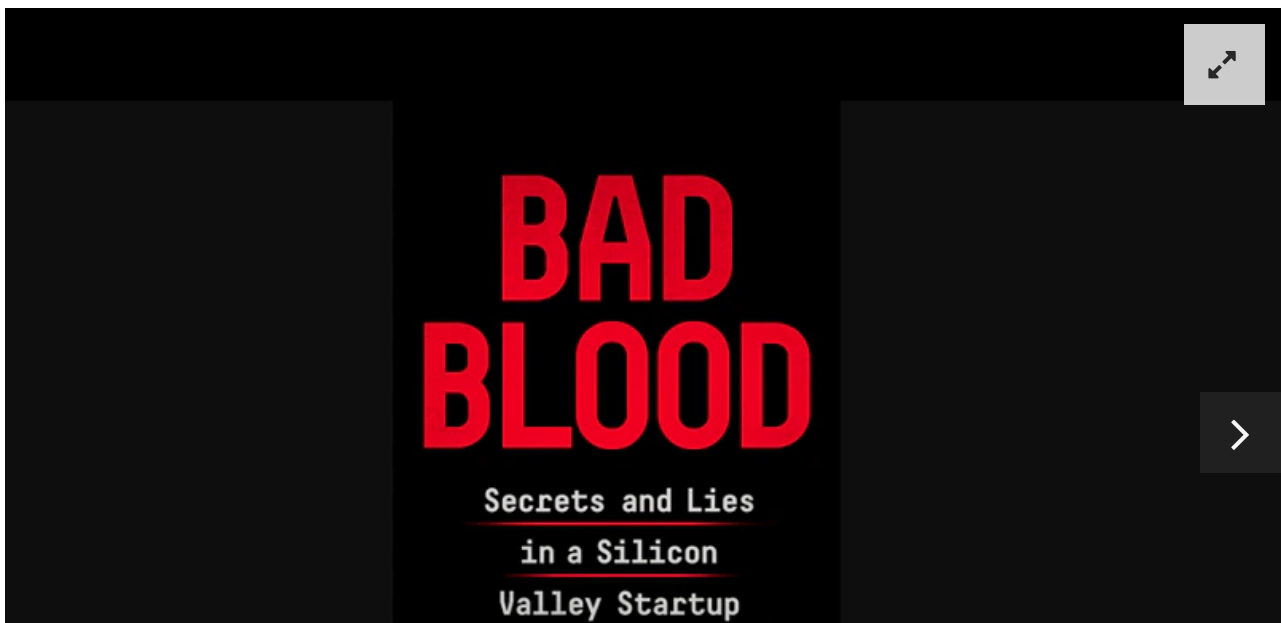
A: I like her because she's inherently sexy. I kept saying this to people when they asked me what's your favorite emoji and my wife said, 'But you never use it!' So I started sending this emoji to my wife.

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## 'The Emoji Code'

By Vyvyan Evans, Picador, 256 pages, \$26



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## Nara Schoenberg



Nara Schoenberg is a features reporter at the Chicago Tribune, where she writes about health, relationships and books. She's reported on the decline of LASIK surgery, tracked down the last free-roaming library cat in Illinois, and chronicled the tumultuous final days of Ernest Hemingway's youngest son. She lives in Oak Park.

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