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The search for a shared emoji language is a sign of the times

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How's this for a dystopian vision? Imagine speaking a language whose individual words are controlled by an obscure committee. Groups of hopefuls relentlessly lobby these bureaucrats, trying to expand the list of permitted expressions. Without more words, they argue, some concepts are literally unthinkable.

This nightmare scenario is an exaggeration but it reflects the mechanics of emojis - the colourful icons in your phone depicting faces, foodstuffs and families. Since Apple added emoji support to iPhones in 2011, their popularity has soared and we now send an estimated 6bn a day. The company values them so highly that the new MacBook Pro has a touch-sensitive strip that works as an "emoji keyboard".

The first quibble with the scenario above is that emojis aren't a language. There are just 1,500 standard symbols , compared with upwards of 100,000 words in English. Linguists see them more as non-verbal cues, replacing the body language, tone and gestures we use when speaking. They don't have a stable system of grammar - yet - and can't be strung together to produce complicated meanings. That said, I did find one person online trying to translate James Joyce's Ulysses into emojis.

What is true, however, is that emojis are governed by an obscure committee: the Unicode Consortium . It standardises the representation of text in computers across the world. Eight American tech companies, plus China's Huawei, German software group SAP, and the government of Oman are full members. They pay $18,000 a year to decide these universal standards - after all, what use is sending a love-heart emoji from your iPhone if it doesn't show up on your partner's Android device?

Each year the consortium suggests new icons. Fifty-one have just been given the nod for 2017, including a vampire, a pair of socks and a woman in a hijab. The latter shows how emojis have become a political battleground. Once, there was no racial diversity among emoji characters; now, many come in five skin tones plus a generic yellow.

A male construction worker appeared in 2010 but it took six years to gain a female version. Until this year, women had a pretty raw deal overall, with female characters limited to a princess, a bride, some dancers in leotards and a receptionist. Men got detectives, athletes and police officers. Our high-tech smartphones were perpetuating old-fashioned stereotypes.

The consortium is now besieged by petitioners demanding more diverse emojis. The hijabi woman was the request of a 15-year-old girl in Germany, while a group from Google secured the addition of female scientists and engineers. A Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign raised $12,400 to lobby for a Chinese dumpling, noting that consortium members were "overwhelmingly male, overwhelming white and overwhelmingly engineers" and that this was "less than ideal" for promoting a "vibrant visual language used throughout the world".

True, but don't underestimate the human ability to subvert any system imposed from above. The peach has come to represent a voluptuous bottom, and there was an outcry last week when Apple made it look less suggestive. The aubergine doubles as male genitalia. A picture of painted fingernails has come to symbolise a certain fabulous insouciance. And despite the professed universality of emojis, cultural differences remain: "prayer hands" in Europe means "thank you" in Japan.

The top-down nature of emoji is a reminder of how much faith we place in tech companies. We happily hand over the meaning of our most intimate communications to them: after all, when Apple changed the peach

symbol, it made flirtatious texts look more like grocery orders. Earlier, it changed the realistic-looking gun to a water pistol while other phones kept the original. As Jeremy Burge of the Emojipedia website noted: "One person could innocently tweet a toy and have that be seen by others as a weapon."

Isn't that strange? When we use emoji, we don't get the final word. If only there was a simple, visual way to represent my anxious face at the implications of that.

3 Talking of miscommunication, the National Health Service email system melted down on Monday after people began to click " reply all " to a test message accidentally sent to 1.2m employees. No word on what these replies said but experience suggests there will have been one offensive joke, one attempt to organise a big night out and one person trying to sell their car. Still, nothing compares to the greatest email nightmare: typing something disobliging about an acquaintance, then - without thinking - entering their name in the "To" field.

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