# **LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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Technology has always shaped the ways we communicate. 600 years ago, it was the printing press; today, it is the internet, and in the future, artificial intelligence will allow robot journalism and simultaneous translation between languages. In parallel with this, we see the development of ‘Global English’ as a world language, and primitive and easily interpretable icons are making a surprise comeback in the shape of the emoji.

When the Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti flew in an airplane for the first time in 1910, he had an epiphany. He was taken aback by the machine’s power and speed and the almost limitless freedom of movement it gave him. Technology, he thought, made it necessary to totally rethink language. Communication should be easy and quick, as there wasn’t time for anything else. Language should liberate itself from the bonds of syntax, which belonged to a past without machines, motors and propellers. Marinetti’s imaginative ideas about a new language for a new technological age were most of all a pipedream, but they were also an expression of a deep understanding of the dynamic relationship that exists between language and technology.

These two things are inextricably linked. When the printing press became widespread in the 15th century, it led to the standardisation of spelling and punctuation, and the mass media of the 20th century – radio and TV – did the same for dialects and colloquialisms. Today, the internet has replaced radio and TV as the big technological driver of language innovation. The digital age has democratised language for better or worse, and fast-paced writing filled with abbreviations, icons and a laissez faire approach to syntax and punctuation has become our preferred type of communication.The future will bring simultaneous translation of written and spoken language, and communication across language barriers will become easy and frictionless. At the same time, non-written communication in the shape of images and icons is becoming increasingly common in our day-to-day communication. We will return to all of this, but first we take a closer look at ‘Globish’, an international variety of English that is rapidly becoming the first truly global language in world history.

**A Universal Language for a Global Age**

Decades before Marinetti dreamed about propellers and free syntax, the German Catholic priest Johann Martin Schleyer had a somewhat different dream. While he slept, God revealed himself to Johann and proclaimed that it was high time that humanity had a common language. Being a faithful man, Johann Schleyer could not gainsay his Lord, and thus in 1879 he launched his new ‘artificial’ language, Volapük. It was an instant success. Less than ten years after Schleyer realised his idea, Volapük had about a million speakers, and hundreds of books and journals were published in the language. The idea of a common language was so good that it was taken up by others. In 1897, the Polish ophthalmologist L.L. Zamenhof presented Esperanto, which also became an international success. The threshold of the 20th century was a time of hitherto unseen levels of technological and economic globalisation, and new languages like Volapük and Esperanto reflected the urge to further connect a rapidly coalescing world under one common language. The hope was that the new languages could become a means of communication and understanding across old language barriers, and a way to achieve international peace and coexistence.

The success, however, had a limit, and the dream of a common world language wasn’t fulfilled with the constructed languages – we got there by other paths. Today, at least, English is the closest thing we’ve ever come to a truly global language. It is obligatory teaching in schools across the world, and it has become the lingua franca of science, business and pop culture. According to Marie Maegaard, a sociolinguistic researcher at Copenhagen University and director of the LANCHART Centre, the dominant status of the English language in the world today is without historic precedence, and it will take quite a while before this changes.

“We need to look very far into the future for English to cease becoming a dominant world language. English has achieved a global status that is so entrenched that it will take some effort to reverse. As a minimum, it would require a massive change of the global power structure.” It is in fact often power that defines what languages become the most common. The role of Latin as the language of the Church, law and natural science is a relic of a time when first the Roman Empire and later the Catholic Church played a dominant role in Europe and the Mediterranean region. In the same way, much of

The success of the English language can be contributed to the superpower status of first Britain and later the United States. Today, English is an official language in almost 100 countries and is spoken by billions. So, when countries like China and India in the future really cement their positions as global superpowers, will Mandarin or Hindi then naturally get the same international dissemination that English has today? Maegaard doubts this. What separates English from the ‘power languages’ of earlier times, she thinks, is that it very much has become a language of globalisation whose use is no longer limited to a power elite:

“The difference between English and former dominant languages like French and German is that it today isn’t a phenomenon limited to a European upper class,” she says. “Now, the whole world speaks English. If you ask me, it will take centuries for this to change.” It is of course not Shakespearean English that is spoken when a German and an Indian meet in a conference room. Instead, they use a simplified and functional version of the language that arises in communication between two people who don’t have English as a mother tongue.

‘Global English’, or ‘Globish’ as the mutation is sometimes called, is a likely candidate for a global language for the 21st century. This is very much because the success of the English language derives from its use by non-native speakers. According to the British Council, this group makes up about three quarters of the world’s overall population of English speakers.

Still, the success comes with a price. One of the by-products of globalisation is the cultural assimilation that happens when individual cultures become globally dominant. It also has consequences for language diversity. Small languages die when new generations fail to carry on the torch, and the long-term consequence will be that the smallest languages disappear. UNESCO estimates that half the world’s 6,000-7,000 languages will be gone by the year 2100. We see the same trend with the disappearance of dialects, which according to Maegaard is another global trend:

“The daily lifestyle that dialects are part of is becoming a thing of the past many places around the world. This is very much related to global trends like globalisation and increased mobility.”

**Without a Byline**

Globalisation is one power that shapes our language and communication; another is technology. We are on the threshold of a new wave of automation caused by accelerating developments in big Data collection, deep learning systems and artificial intelligence. In particular, jobs characterised by analysis face being automated, but the new technological systems will also greatly influence industries that work with communication and languages – for instance, media and journalism.

Even today we see a growing use of software that can generate simple articles and news items on the basis of pattern recognition and keywords in large text bodies and raw data. The global news agency Associated Press has had such systems in place since 2014. AP’s ‘robot journalists’ spit out about 1,000 stories every month, and according to spokespersons from the bureau, they contain far fewer factual errors than stories written by flesh-and-blood journalists. So far, robot journalists have mainly written simple and jargon-filled financial journalism about rapid movements on the stock market, but similar technology is also used in sports journalism and other news coverage that is largely based on bits of fact that are combined and recommunicated. Nonetheless, we have likely only seen the beginning of this trend. The software company Narrative Science estimates that upwards of 90 percent of the total news coverage will be handled by computers by 2030 – though it should be noted that Narrative Science makes a living from producing exactly this sort of news-generating software.

We are also seeing rapid progress in real-time translation between languages, and optimists now toy with the idea that we may not need to learn foreign languages in the future. The software company Skype proclaims on the website for its translator software Skype Translator, that software like theirs can finally break down language barriers and allow us to communicate with each other across national boundaries without the need for learning other languages.

Common for robot journalism and automated real-time translation is that the optimistic predictions probably lie further into the future than the tech gurus would have us believe. Both real- time translation and robot journalism are tailored to handle specific tasks based on clearly defined input. It is still difficult to automate tasks that require deep linguistic and cultural insight, and the ability to be abstract and catch the nuances in language that don’t easily translate. According to senior futurist at the Copenhagen institute for futures Studies Klaus Æ. Mogensen, who is also this magazine’s science and technology editor, there will still be a need for skilled translators in the future. He points to banal examples like the cultural differences in how you, in countries like Germany and France, in different social situations use either formal or informal address.

Similarly, Marie Maegaard points out that language and social situations are closely related, and the fast and basic understanding that real-time translation provides won’t fully replace the value of speaking the language of another:

“Language is also a social practice among people which has several hidden functions like creating bonds and maintaining relationships between people. These things become harder if we have a technological intermediary in our communication.”

**Return of the Icons**

Communication, however, is more than just the spoken and written language, and in parallel with the developments outlined above, we are seeing a global explosion in visual and image-borne communication.

It is true that icons and images have always been important. Before public schools became common in the west, large parts of the population were illiterate, and hence communication to the masses through images was common. In city streets, easily recognisable icons and symbols signalled the functions of buildings, and in the wall and ceiling decorations of Christian churches images could communicate the Christian mythology to an illiterate audience. We might imagine that the age of icons disappeared with the advent of common literacy – but that is far from being the case.

Towards the end of the 00s, visual communication got a new and more colourful player on the field: the graphic emoji. The importance of the little yellow faces in daily communication was manifested when Oxford Dictionaries in 2015 selected the emoji ‘face with Tears of joy’ as their word of the year. The winning icon was measured by mobile analysis company SwiftKey to be the most-used emoji at the global level.

The most conspicuous part of the selection was no doubt that the word of the year wasn’t a word, but an icon. In connection with the selection, the president of Oxford Dictionaries Casper Grathwohl stated that emoji were no longer something solely used in teenagers’ text messages, but truly had been embraced as a nuanced form of expression capable of crossing language barriers. Vyv Evans, a linguist from Bangor University in wales, agrees: “In terms of reach and in terms of a natural language, English is way ahead of anything else. But in terms of usage, emoji far outstrip even English as a system of communication. Today, there are estimated to be around 2 billion smartphone users of the world who send over 41 billion text messages over 6 billion emoji on a daily basis,” he says to SCENARIO.

In 2015, Evans worked with the British telecom company TalkTalk Mobile on a survey that showed that 8 in 10 Brits use emoji in communication. The survey prompted The Telegraph newspaper to name the emoji the fastest growing and evolving language in Great Britain. In a similar study conducted by the branding company Emogi, it turned out that the little icons were used just as much by the older generations as by the younger. One of the reasons for the huge popularity of emoji is that they give written communication something that it has other- wise lacked: tone, nuance, and the ability to easily express emotions. Emoji hence fill the vacuum that used to be filled by the more tediously typed emoticons :-) This is a very important function in our daily communication, Evans points out:

“Emoji provide what I call a visual gestalt. They allow us to get a complex emotional spectrum of experience in a simple, single glyph, much quicker than words,” he says. “Almost three-quarters of the meaning we derive from everyday spoken face-to-face interaction doesn’t come from language; it comes from non-verbal cues. Emoji has exploded because it puts all the nonverbal meaning back into the communicative channel.”

The first known use of emoticons in print can be traced back to 1881 in the American Puck Magazine. Here, a satirical article demonstrated how you could create typographical art with vertically placed characters that indicated four different human emotions: joy, melancholy, amazement, and indifference. But it wasn’t until 2011 that emoji got their final international break- through with Apple’s iPhone iOS 5. Today, emoji are an integrated part of all mobile and digital devices.

In just a few years, the number and use of the small pictograms has exploded. It has even been tried to combine emoji to retell literary works like Alice in Wonderland and Moby Dick in their entirety. So, have we only seen the tip of the iceberg, and do emoji hold the potential to become a new kind of global language? Evans is sceptical. He points out that icons and text don’t compete, but rather complement each other.

“Both elements are essential to the message. What has happened is that digital communication is catching up with what is going on in spoken interaction. It is not that one will replace the other,” he says. ”At the moment there are somewhere between 800 and 1600 emoji, depending on the operating system; so compared to a natural language, emoji is highly impoverished in terms of the semantic range that you can convey.”

**The Forbidden Eggplant**

In 2015, the previously mentioned mobile analysis company SwiftKey measured the popularity of various emoji in different countries. Some of the most-used emoji in the US, it turned out, were the baseball, the pizza slice, and the moneybag with a dollar sign. These three icons obviously have a strong connection to US culture, and herein lies a point: in spite of the superficially universal character of emoji, they change meaning according to the cultural context they are used in. They can even communicate things they were never intended for. Perhaps the best example of this dynamic is the eggplant emoji, which has be- come synonymous with the male sex organ. The eggplant’s transformation from vegetable to penis has made the social medium Instagram ban the little icon entirely from its search engine.

In an age where language barriers are smaller than ever, it can come as a surprise that image-communication grows at such a massive pace as we see today. But it isn’t the first time we have been taken by surprise. In the 1990s, no-one foresaw the enormous success of texting. The future, after all, belonged to mobile phoning. Today, texting has long since become one of the primary features of phones. The emoji have taken a similar journey, from silly icons to universally used communication tools. In the opinion of Vyv Evans, emoji have a bright future:

“They have only been going for about five years on a global stage, and they will evolve. The important thing is that this kind of mechanism for expressing ourselves is essential to the effect of communication, and that’s why they have become such a hit on the global stage.”

As shown by the success of both emoji and Global English, technology, globalisation and linguistic evolution go hand in hand. Global communication doesn’t necessarily mean more sophisticated communication, however – on the contrary, it is often the simple, easily interpreted and understandable that becomes the common basis for language and communication in the global age.