

READING CHALLENGE

How Emoji Changed the Way We Talk

From 176 tiny pictures in Japan to a global language of smiley faces, hearts, and thumbs up

Level	A2 (Elementary)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	True Stories
Duration	~15 minutes
Skill	Reading

Every day, billions of people around the world send messages on their phones. And in many of those messages, you will find small, colourful pictures: smiley faces, hearts, animals, food, and hundreds of other tiny images. These are emoji. Today, it is hard to imagine sending a message without them. But emoji did not always exist. They were invented in Japan in 1999, and their story is more interesting than you might think. How did 176 small pictures from a Japanese phone company become a [global](#) language used by almost everyone on Earth?

Before Emoji: The Emoticon

Before emoji, people used something called emoticons. An emoticon is a face made from keyboard characters. For example, :-) means a happy face, and :- (means a sad face. The first known emoticon was used in 1982 by a computer scientist named Scott Fahlman at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States. He suggested using :-) and :- (in online messages so people could tell if someone was joking or being serious. Emoticons were very [popular](#) in the 1990s. People used them in emails, chat rooms, and early [text messages](#). But emoticons had a problem: they were made of letters and punctuation marks, so they did not look very exciting. They were also hard to read sometimes. People wanted something better — something more colourful and easier to understand.

Shigetaka Kurita and the First Emoji

In 1999, a young Japanese artist named Shigetaka Kurita was working for a mobile phone company called NTT DoCoMo. The company was building a new mobile internet service called i-mode. Kurita had a job: he needed to find a way to help people [communicate](#) more easily on their small phone [screens](#). Phone screens in 1999 were tiny — much smaller than today. You could only see a few words at a time. Kurita had an idea. What if people could use small pictures instead of words? A picture of the sun could mean "sunny weather." A picture of a heart could mean "love." This would save space and make messages faster. Kurita sat down and started to [design](#) a set of pictures. He drew each one on a 12-by-12 pixel grid — that is only 144 tiny squares. The pictures had to be very simple because of the small size. He created 176 emoji in total. The set included faces, weather [symbols](#), food, animals, sports, and everyday objects. The word "emoji" comes from Japanese: "e" means "picture" and "moji" means "letter" or "character." So emoji literally means "picture letter."

Emoji Spread Around the World

At first, emoji were only available in Japan. Other Japanese phone companies saw how much people loved them, so they created their own emoji sets too. But there was a problem: the emoji on one phone company did not work on another. If you sent a smiley face from one phone, it might appear as a blank square on a different phone. This problem got bigger when emoji started to [spread](#) outside Japan. In 2007, Apple released the first iPhone. A Google team noticed that many people in Japan were asking for emoji on their iPhones. In 2008 and 2009, Apple and Google sent a [request](#) to an organisation called the Unicode Consortium. This organisation decides which characters and symbols work on all computers and phones around the world. They asked Unicode to [approve](#) a standard set of emoji that would work on every phone, every computer, and every app. In 2010, Unicode said yes. They added 722 emoji to their system. This was the moment emoji went global. Now, if you sent a smiley face

from an iPhone, it would appear correctly on an Android phone, a computer, or a tablet.

The Emoji Explosion

After 2010, emoji became incredibly popular. Every year, Unicode adds new emoji. People and organisations from around the world can suggest new ones. In 2015, Unicode added emoji with different skin colours so that more people could feel represented. They also added food from different cultures, flags of all countries, and symbols for different religions. Today, there are about 3,600 emoji available. Some of the most popular ones are the "Face with Tears of Joy" emoji, the red heart, and the thumbs up. In 2015, the Oxford English Dictionary chose the "Face with Tears of Joy" emoji as its "Word of the Year." It was the first time a picture — not a word — won this prize. Companies also started using emoji in their advertising. Films, songs, and even books have been written using only emoji. In 2017, there was even an animated film called "The Emoji Movie." Every year on 17 July, people celebrate World Emoji Day.

How Emoji Help Us Communicate

Why are emoji so useful? The answer is simple: when you talk to someone face to face, you can see their **expression**. You can hear their voice go up and down. You can tell if they are happy, sad, joking, or angry. But when you send a text message, all of this is missing. The words are flat. There is no voice, no face. This is where emoji help. They add **emotion** to messages. If you write "I am fine," it can sound cold or boring. But if you write "I am fine 😊," the reader knows you are really okay. If you write "I am fine 😞," the reader knows something is wrong. Emoji work like the expressions on your face, but in a message. Scientists have studied emoji and found that when people see a smiley face emoji, the same part of their brain becomes active as when they see a real human smile. Our brains treat emoji like real faces.

When Emoji Go Wrong

Emoji are not perfect. Sometimes, people **misunderstand** them. The same emoji can mean different things in different countries. For example, the "thumbs up" emoji is positive in most Western countries, but in some Middle Eastern countries, it can be rude. The "folded hands" emoji is often used to mean "please" or "thank you" in Western countries, but in Japan, it means "sorry" or "I am praying." Age also makes a difference. Studies show that younger people and older people sometimes understand the same emoji differently. A teenager might use the skull emoji to mean "that is so funny I died laughing," but a grandparent might think it means something about death. Even the way emoji look on different phones can cause confusion. The same emoji might look happy on an iPhone but serious on a Samsung phone. This is because Apple, Google, Samsung, and other companies each design their own version of every emoji. Unicode tells them what the emoji should be — for example, "smiling face with open mouth" — but each company draws it in its own style.

New Emoji Every Year

Every year, the Unicode Consortium meets to decide which new emoji to add. Anyone can suggest a new emoji, but the process is long. You need to write a detailed proposal explaining why the emoji is needed. You need to show that many people would use it. The committee then votes on each proposal. Some emoji suggestions are rejected. For example, people have asked for emoji of specific famous people, but Unicode says no — emoji should represent general ideas, not individual people. The emoji [keyboard](#) is [updated](#) about once a year. Recent additions include a shaking face, a moose, a jellyfish, and a pair of maracas. The committee tries to add emoji that represent different cultures, professions, and activities so that everyone can find an emoji that looks like them or shows what they do.

The Future of Emoji

Emoji have changed the way we communicate in just 25 years. What started as 176 tiny pictures on a Japanese phone is now a language used by billions. Some people even call emoji "the first truly global language" because they work across borders and languages. A smiley face means happiness in every country. A heart means love everywhere. Of course, emoji will never replace words. You cannot write a school essay or a business email using only emoji. But they have made our daily messages warmer, funnier, and more human. Shigetaka Kurita never expected his small drawings to become so important. He once said that he was just trying to make messages easier to understand. Today, his original 176 emoji are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York — real art in a real museum. From a tiny 12-by-12 pixel grid to the Museum of Modern Art: that is quite a journey for a small smiley face.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
symbol	a picture, shape, or sign that represents something
design	to draw or plan how something will look before making it
emotion	a strong feeling, such as happiness, sadness, or anger
text message	a short written message sent from one phone to another
spread	to move or reach more people or places over time
request	to ask for something officially or politely
popular	liked or enjoyed by many people
expression	the look on a person's face that shows how they feel
update	to make something more modern by adding new things
misunderstand	to not understand something correctly
screen	the flat part of a phone, computer, or TV where you see pictures and words
keyboard	the set of buttons you press to type letters and numbers
communicate	to share information, ideas, or feelings with another person
approve	to officially agree to something or say it is acceptable
global	relating to the whole world

Comprehension Quiz

1. Who designed the first set of emoji?

- A) Steve Jobs
- B) Shigetaka Kurita
- C) A team at Google
- D) A Korean artist

2. How many emoji were in the first set?

- A) 12
- B) 76
- C) 176
- D) 1,000

3. What does the word 'emoji' mean in Japanese?

- A) happy face
- B) small art
- C) picture letter
- D) phone symbol

4. Why can emoji sometimes cause problems?

- A) They use too much phone memory
- B) They are too expensive to send
- C) Different people may understand the same emoji differently
- D) Older phones cannot receive them

5. How many emoji are available today (approximately)?

- A) About 500
- B) About 1,000
- C) About 2,000
- D) About 3,600

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	B	Who designed the first set of emoji?
2	C	How many emoji were in the first set?
3	C	What does the word 'emoji' mean in Japanese?
4	C	Why can emoji sometimes cause problems?
5	D	How many emoji are available today (approximately)?