Egyptian Hieroglyphs to Emojis: Pictographs as a Universal language System and Its Role in Creating the 'Global Brain'

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Abstract

Egyptian Hieroglyphs are one of the oldest language systems of human civilization. Hieroglyphs were a pictographic language system and are even studied today for understanding a culture that has been lost in the sands of time. In this digital era, we have taken a similar route like the hieroglyphs through Emojis. Emojis are all around the internet and social networking apps like Facebook, Whatsapp Etc. They are basically a mix of emoticons and other images of objects that take different meanings within the context they are used. Emojis as a pictographic concept was introduced by Shigetaka Kurita (emoticons as a concept was initially introduced by Scott Fahlman of Carnegie Mellon University). All these pictographs are part of a communication medium which particularly exists in the digital communication network.

Even when we have highly evolved verbal language systems all around the world, emojis make their presence felt. They currently serve the function of Determinatives inside most language systems, but a lot of research is being done to develop them into a full-fledged language system. Peter Russell talks about the concept of a 'Global Brain' that emerges out of a connected/networked system of human communication and Emojis as a language system acts as an assistive force in creating unified perceptions in a network system. The paper tries to shed light on this aspect of Emojis that presents before us the chance to take our methods of digital communication to another level of self-expression and networked consciousness.

The paper also uses the Emotional Contagion theory to further substantiate the effect of Emojis on interpersonal communications.

Keywords: Hieroglyphs, Emoji, Pictograph, Determinatives, Global Brain

Introduction

We are living in a connected world, connected yet detached, its filled with a dichotomous sense of belonging. There is often a deterministic and moralistic sense of understanding how technology is an evil force that dislocates people from their social relationships and establishes a highly individuated sense of being. This perception has in no way affected the growth of technology, but it creates a larger point of debate among the popular culture about how much humans are becoming dependent on automated systems to sustain their social and personal lives.

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What this debate – arguing that community is either lost or completely recreated online – fails to recognize is that community has long been freed from geography and that the Internet may hold as much promise for reconnecting people to communities of place as it does for liberating people from them. (Castells, 2005, p.217)

Post-modernist theory is one such theory, which has a very suspicious view of world systems. It says that we are living in an age of simulacra, a stage where we can't differentiate between the hyper and real anymore. The enhanced and accentuated media involvements have lead us to a cultural limbo where our routine interactions have been designed using computer algorithms and strategically employed visual props. The cycle of Marxian mode of production and consumption has juxtaposed itself to a domain of the hyperreal.

Mobile phones or Smartphones are the favourite playgrounds of technological innovation today. They are bringing out jaw dropping paraphernalia that makes us wonder about the sheer potential of modern day technology. Today, we can commute in our 'smart' cars and explore uncharted territories with ease. We can educate ourselves with the current trends of health and well-being sitting in our own living rooms. We can create or recycle items using DIY videos. Efficient resource management is the buzzword that's pushing our lives forward. So if we keep arguing about the banality of such technological advancements in creating polarities in human interactions then we are just hanging onto cultural puritanism that fails to accept and evolve.

Let me begin with the contention that today, everyone is a cyborg. This statement depends, I think, on how the cyborg is conceived. While the 'classical' notion of the cyborg figures an intimate connection between the organic and the technological – most obviously in terms of implants and prostheses – we can broaden this out by thinking about the ways our lives are touched by technologies in significant ways. (Bell, 2006, p.150)

Egyptian Hieroglyphs to Emojis: The Return of the Pictographs
Egyptian hieroglyphs were the language system used by the Egyptians roughly around 3200 B.C.E - 350 C.E. It was used mainly by the Egyptian elites and hence was a main tool in recording Egyptian monumental inscriptions and religious texts. Other daily documents, literature etc were written using pen with a more cursive form called Hieratic.

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Fig 1. A limestone with Hieratic inscriptions

Hieroglyphs mainly consisted of pictures of objects or animals and each of them used to denote certain sound and in some cases used to directly refer to the object depending upon the context. Hieroglyphs were an advanced form of language system during that point in history and this is evident from the fact that Egyptians were very much keen on recording their merits and myths in grant structures like Pyramids. Hieroglyphs were lost to the abyss of civilization after Egypt was conquered by the Roman Empire. Today, a lot of research is done on the Ancient Egyptian language and each moment archaeologists and socio-linguists are baffled by the sheer complexity and depth of this pictographic language system.
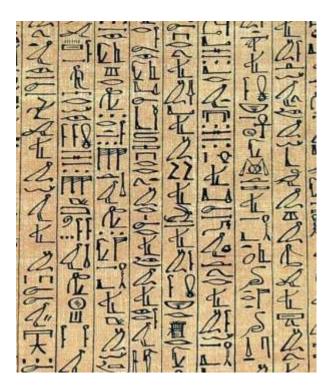
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Fig 2. An Illustration of Egyptian Hieroglyphs

Emoji in Japanese means e (絵, "picture") + moji (文字, "character") Picture+character. So, it is a symbolic character denoted through a picture. Emoji is everywhere around us. They have evolved as a pictographic language system in itself but often used as Determinatives in common interactions. Determinatives basically help us understand the meaning of the written word more clearly. Emojis are evolving at a faster rate than that of the Egyptian hieroglyphs but they haven't reached the level of complexity that Hieroglyphs had achieved. Maybe we haven't yet realized the full potential of Emojis or we might just want Emojis to be an 'enhancer' for the existing language systems.

> Emoji are standardized picture-words that are used commonly in informal messages of all kinds to add semantic nuances, to emphasize tone, to avoid potential misunderstandings, and to fulfill various phatic and emotive functions; they are not meant to replace existing scripts. (Danesi, 2017, p.167)

There is already a crowd funded Emoji Dictionary (You can visit www.emojipedia.org for further information) and *Moby Dick*, the classic piece of literature has already been transliterated into an Emoji version! One of the main setbacks that Emojis face currently is its learning base. Not everyone knows the Emoji language, it varies on a lot of factors like age, ethnicity, cultural relativism etc. But somehow, the dynamic nature of Emojis help them to evolve spontaneously and spread through Cyberculture thus paving way for a more homogenized mode of communication bypassing personal and cultural differences. This flexibility is itself the most vibrant characteristics of Emojis. Again, when it comes to question of Emojis being a pictographic language, people often compare them with the Egyptian Hieroglyphs. But then comparing emojis with an evolved language system like that of hieroglyphs itself is a rudimentary effort. But nonetheless this is a necessary reference point to study the effect of emojis in the contemporary world. Emojis are the product of a cultural revolution, a transcendence of mankind from the real to the virtual.

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Fig 3. An illustration of different Emoji faces.

Rather than trying to become a structured language system emojis aim at creating community consciousness. They integrate common behavioural patterns of individuals and make the process of interpersonal communication more swift and interesting. This does have its downsides though. Complex and abstract ideas that doesn't adhere to fixated common understandings are hard to be deciphered through emojis. It wouldn't be wrong to say that emojis cannot be used for formal contexts of communications like meetings, formal discussions etc as of its current stage of development.

The One and the Whole: Emojis in a Global Brain

The effect and effort of emojis was never to be a substitute for the existing languages but to loosen up the structural rigidity of languages as we know it, to make communication more resourcefully efficient. They are an active part of the Internet age that thrives on what Peter Russell would call as 'Global Brain'.

In his book *The Global brain awakens*, Peter Russell explains about the evolutionary step of humans into a networked and interconnected organism that is part of a larger 'social super-organism'. In other words, he envisions how our individual brains would all be connected like a synaptic network forming a bigger brain, a larger stream of consciousness called the 'Global brain'. Emojis as a language system acts as an assistive force in creating unified perceptions in a network system.

> As more and more nations move into the information age, the technology of communications and information processing will dramatically affect the human race, as we become increasingly integrated through the burgeoning network of electronic synapses. (Russell, 2000, p.130)

This phenomenon of Emojis becoming a global language system can be further substantiated by the Emotional Contagion theory. The emotional contagion effect is, I would argue, the driving force of emojis making it a viral phenomenon. When we share a message with an emoji to its tail, the message

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itself is lifted, enhanced to a level of attentiveness that pulls us towards understanding the message. It is not attenuated like the redundant and monotonous quality of letters. If a joke is shared with a laughing emoji then the recipient will be persuaded to reassess the joke so that he/she may comply with the shared emotion of laughter.

> Social-psychophysiological investigations have found that individual's emotional experiences and facial expressions, as measured by EMG procedures, tend to mimic at least rudimentary features of the changes in emotional expression of others that the subjects observe. (Hatfield, Cacioppo, Rapson, 2003, p.19)

Research has shown that when we look at an Emoji, certain areas of our brain gets activated which originally gets activated while looking at a real face. This means that Emojis have a deeper effect on our interactions than what we have believed. Our brains register Emojis as nonverbal form of communication and hence for example, when we see a Sad emoji, our brain registers its emotional quality faster than when we use normal verbal language to communicate our state of mind. This can be equated with how we use tones when communicating through phone or non-verbal cues like expressions and gestures while communicating face to face.

Fig 4. A newer version of Emojis introduced by Apple in 2016.

Conclusion: What is Real?

> If the emoji code is ever to become a true universal language, it cannot become fractured through usage or become too diversified through cultural coding. (Danesi, 2017, p.157)

Danesi has a legitimate concern here, as the possibility of developing a new language in a Cyber-era and mostly to suit the needs of its Cyber citizens seems to be a welcome proposal indeed. But nothing survives in its ideal form and it would be a negation of intellectual prowess to merely view

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Emojis as an innocent form of communication stripping all the capitalist agendas from it. If it trends, then it sells! This is the motto of the digital capitalists who have already tapped into the potential of shaping up Emojis in its arena of 'must try' products. Different online companies are offering Emoji keyboards (virtual), Emoji Stickers and Apple has recently introduced Animojis, the Emoji line up that augments your facial expressions via Face Recognition Technology. The deep visual qualities of Emojis are the main reason behind facilitating and appropriating them, according to Capitalist fervour. The post-modern world is a spectacle of visions, *it* believes what it sees and once *you* believe, then *we* consume it.

We can't sit back and whine about a dystopian future where machines would take control of our lives and how we would become slaves of an automated system. It is simply not that easy to untangle the complex nature of the Techno-Human Condition.

> Humans are not bundles of traits, nor are they isolated Cartesian individuals, nor are they merely hubs in social networks; they are all these things-but much more. The point is not that any particular technology may affect a particular human; the point is that we cannot understand what humans are unless we also understand the meanings of the technological systems that we make, and which in turn re-make us. (Allenby, Sarewitz, 2013, p.83)

We are also growing, evolving together with machines, we are ourselves becoming machines and the Pre-Cyber age conundrum about the nature of reality is simply outdated! Imagine you are in a meeting, smart phone buzzes to remind you about ordering a gift for your spouse. You swipe on your screen and your order is placed. This is the kind of world we live in or its better to say we are living in multiple worlds connected together with infinite possibilities.

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