



Published in the German Magazine
form 2064, Feb 2016
now with additional Pictograms

Jochen Gros: Word of the Year?

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“Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2015 is ... a tears-of-joy emoji. That’s right – for the first time ever, the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year is a pictograph.” ¹

But what could possibly make this little image such a big deal? Well, there’s its incredibly frequent, global use for one thing. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the fact that the award confers a sort of official recognition on the emoji as a “word”, or at least a picture word – a modern-day hieroglyph, as it were.

Emojis and Other Pictograms

Describing emojis as “words” changes the way we look at them, making them not just a means of illustrating and emotionalising the text of an email, message or post, but also a form of writing in its own right. In Japan, this notion is probably less new, being encapsulated in the very meaning of the word “emoji”, which comes from “e” for picture and “moji” for character. The characters in a pictorial writing system, however, represent not letter sounds but words, which makes emojis not so much picture characters as “picture words” used in the context of a pictographic script.

On the other hand, emojis in their current guise are a very specific form of picture word, one that falls far short of the criteria for a genuine pictorial writing system. They do, though, represent a significant addition to the already established vocabulary of pictograms and icons. Pictograms are basically simplified representations of people and objects, albeit representations that can also be used as word pictures for physical things such as “man”, “woman”, “tree”, “car”, etc. Although this is merely the most basic form of visual expression, all these pictograms together would add up to a sizeable chapter in the lexicon of any pictorial writing system.

Icons, which first became useful with the operation of computers such as folders and trash cans, on the other hand, might resemble pictograms but actually are symbols for which we have to make a mental leap; in other words, they are easily understandable metaphorical representations of what are essentially rather abstract concepts. In the case of both pictograms and icons, however, their practical usage to date means that we barely

see them for what they actually are, namely categories of a pictorial writing system. Instead, we still regard them as “infographics” that are useful for signage or for chiefly emotionless explanations of products. If pictograms and icons are to be used as picture words, they need to be available in digital form to every individual – as is the case with emojis.

Nonetheless, the rapid changes in pictograms, icons, and emojis seem, at least in theory, to be moving in one particular direction: towards the establishment of a “new pictorial writing system”. What is indeed “new” here is that, before long, it will be technically and economically feasible for anyone to insert what are, compared to earlier pictorial writing systems, relatively complex and therefore largely self-explanatory pictures into all kinds of text – using them together with letters and in much the same way. The full significance of this, however, is something that will only become apparent with hindsight.

The “Pictorial Turn”

In our long history much documented in books and pictures, the dialectics of words and images, of letter- and picture-based writing systems, of rationality and emotionality, has, as we know, repeatedly resulted in religious disputes and, as in the case of the Byzantine iconoclasm of the eighth and ninth centuries, occasionally even in violence. Indeed, disputes over these opposing forces remained bitterly fought right up until the latter days of the pre-modernist era, after which the pendulum began to swing increasingly towards abstraction and rationality, and not just in the designs of the Bauhaus but in language use, too.

In this context, the current situation represents an entirely new opportunity. After all, if letter- and picture-based writing systems can be incorporated in the same line with very little effort and at no cost, then we could see the age-old antithetical relationship between words and pictures, between rationality and emotionality, reconciled in the key arena of language. For this to happen, though, there needs to be a renewed interest in both sides of the coin, including in the often forgotten resistance to the historical antipathy towards symbolism, up to and including the anti ornament attitudes of modernism. In people such as Jean Paul (1763–1825), the German poet whose work was,

in its day, more widely read than that of his contemporaries Goethe and Schiller. While the then prevailing aesthetic and linguistic current rejected all metaphors on principle, even written ones, disclaiming them as “non-rational” and even “lies”, Jean Paul insisted on using them liberally and idiosyncratically, championing a new “picturesque language” that would reinvigorate a tongue that had become stale with abstraction, writing for instance that *“given the exercise of the mind’s spring heels, the increased ease with which all ideas may be combined, the interexchange between all parts of the brain, the world must surely end as it began: with bold pictures.”*²

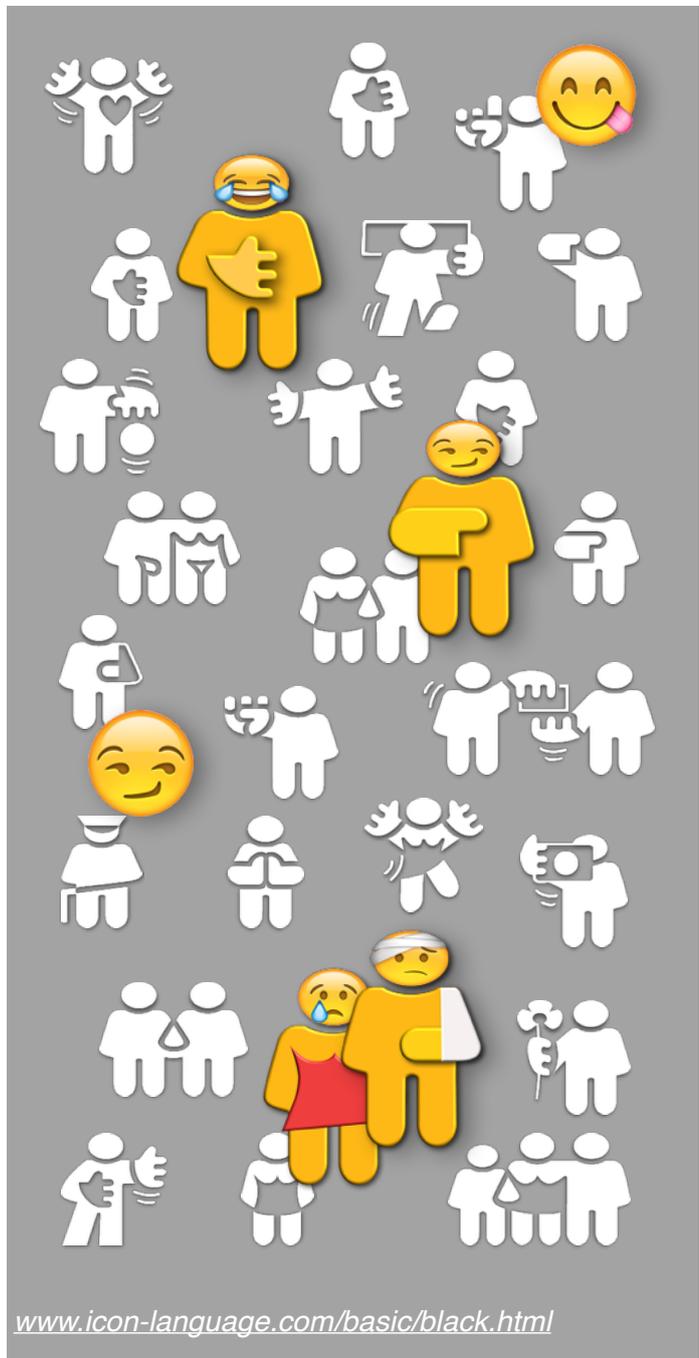
It wasn’t until around 100 years ago, however, that the idea of a new “picture-based language” gained a graphical form, when Otto Neurath and Gerd Arntz not only developed groundbreaking pictograms but also presented them as a complete pictorial “helping language”. Despite hostility from various quarters (including the Werkbund), Neurath publically acknowledged: “As I am under the deep impression of hieroglyphs and other forms of pictorial writing I do not hesitate to describe my work [...] as the renaissance of hieroglyphs.”³ With the rise of computers, writers such as Timothy Leary and Vilém Flusser then developed much more far-reaching visions, the latter even prophesying a general move away from alphabet-based languages towards pictorial codes⁴, although that was little more than a theory extrapolated from a fundamentally new technical logic. Just a few years later, however, William John Thomas Mitchell, in writings informed by wide-ranging observations on art and the media, identified what he dubs a “pictorial turn”⁵, pointing to the renewed general emphasis on pictures, on visual thinking and communication, brought about by the digital age.

These reflections on picture theory, however, made no mention at all of designed projects, such as the establishment of a “new pictorial writing system”, meaning these writers and thinkers can hardly claim the credit when a cute little pictogram comes out of an entirely different field and goes on to be named “word” of the year. Instead, this award is a prime example of a grass roots shift in language use that happens even before it is studied and cultivated, one in which the graphic, or rather typographic, design of picture words of all kinds, from pictograms to emojis, plays a key role from the outset.

Typography Plus Meaning

Word pictures, of course, offer graphic designers far more scope than typographic letters. And yet, already, the form of emojis with their familiar moon-shaped faces seems to be pretty well defined and its possibilities more or less exhausted. Additional meaning can only be generated if, for example, the facial expressions of emojis are combined with the body language of pictograms – even though this might well require greater line spacing (space that could also be used for even more complex and expressive pictures).

Mimics and body language



The question is, however, whether we should then still be selecting our emojis from well- or not-so-well-stocked menus? It is, after all, far easier to generate word pictures by typing the appropriate words, much as the Chinese are able to use the Latin alphabet to enter transcriptions of Chinese words (Pinyin) and thus generate the corresponding Chinese characters. These characters or pictures, however, need to be made widely available in a font that combines letters and pictures. Technically, that could be done over here, too, but it seems we will have to wait a while longer for the introduction of such fonts. We can, though, already use an entirely different kind of technology to digitally draw all manner of picture words without the recourse to menus and fonts. This line of development began with the touchscreen and is being fuelled by a growing number of apps, apps that are not only paving the way for a “digital renaissance in handwriting” but also allowing users to draw and paint by hand.⁶

Pictorial Writing Goes Digital

In fact, it's only fairly recent that we have been able to carry around our own personal touchscreens thanks to smartphones and iPads, but, already, apps such as Upad and Notesshelf mean we cannot only keep digital diaries on them but also use them to write handwritten emails and to illustrate emails using either a finger or a stylus. Since the launch of iOS9, users of Apple's native Notes app have been able to do the same. And with Gmail already allowing users to handwrite and draw, presumably it won't be long before every other email program follows suit. Users who already handwrite their emails, meanwhile, can also doodle their own smileys.



All in all, we can probably assume that the vocabulary of widely understood picture words will continue to grow and spread, using different technologies and taking various forms. We can, though, only really think in terms of a “new pictorial language” when we start combining picture words, when connections can be visualized, when the individual elements can be used to form sentences – more or less in the manner of Egyptian and Chinese grammar.

Visual Grammar – The Logical Next Step

When we form words, we generally also form sentences, and that requires at least an implicit form of grammatical rules. With regard to word pictures, pictograms, icons, and emojis, however, there seems to be little demand for such a thing at present. And yet the basics of a visual grammar are already within reach using today’s technology. With comics’ “speed lines” and animations of the flick book kind both already clearly communicating movement, it is, for instance, easy enough to imagine how figures in a pictorial writing system might represent such actions and thus visualize verbs. It would be equally easy to visualize personal pronouns like “me” and “you” via pointed finger pictographs, while plurals could, as in Chinese, be represented by multiplying symbols. In short: given the means already available, adding a visual grammar to our now ubiquitous pictograms would be a natural next step.⁷

And who’s to say that this new pictorial writing system wouldn’t, in fact, be good for more than just illustrating haikus, or translating the Ten Commandments?

1 Oxford Dictionary, available at <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/11/word-of-the-year-2015-emoji/> (last checked 26 January 2016).

2 Beate Allert, *Die Metapher und ihre Krise. Zur Dynamik der ‚Bilderschrift‘ Jean Pauls*, New York: Peter Lang, 1987.

3 Otto Neurath, *Gesammelte bildpädagogische Schriften*, Vol. 3, Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1991.

4 Vilém Flusser, *Ins Universum der technischen Bilder*, Göttingen: European Photography, 1985.

5 William John Thomas Mitchell, *The Pictorial Turn*, in: *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

6 Jochen Gros, *Font Shop*, “Tod der Handschrift? Von wegen ...”, available at <http://www.fontblog.de/tod-der-handschrift-von-wegen/> (last checked on 23 Dec. 2015).

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