SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — The Oxford English Dictionary declared an emoji its 2015 word of the year. This was puzzling for many. The emoji it singled out — an image of a laughing yellow face crying tears of joy — didn’t fit most people’s definition of a word.

Language experts around the world, on the other hand, weren’t shocked. Most linguists agree that a word is a unit that is meaningful; emoji fits that definition. Plus, the choice recognizes how the yellow smiley faces and other colorful emojis representing food, animals and hand gestures affect the way people talk online.

Bangor University linguistics professor Vyv Evans conducted a 2015 study. Evans found that 80 percent of smartphone users in Britain use emojis. Almost all smartphone users under age 25 text with emojis. A study conducted by keyboard app company SwiftKey found that 74 percent of Americans use emojis every day.

Apple and Android made emojis available in 2011 and 2013, respectively. Since then, emojis have become one of the biggest Internet communication breakthroughs.
Facial Expressions Say A Lot

According to Evans, 70 percent of our face-to-face communication comes from nonverbal signals. These cues include facial expressions, body language, pitch and intonation, or the rise and fall of the voice. Words account for only about 30 percent of what we say.

Consider saying “I love you” as a statement with a falling intonation. That meaning is hugely different from saying “I love you?” he noted.

Emails, text messages and instant messages mostly allow us to communicate with words. It’s easy to see how messages can lose their meaning. Evans calls this the Angry Jerk Phenomenon.

“You’ll recognize it instantly,” he said. “You get an email from someone who you know to be calm and sane, and they come across as a completely angry jerk.” The instant you hit send, you lose control over how a message is interpreted, Evans added.

Emoticons Came First

A December report from Bloomberg news organization found that 8 trillion text messages are sent each year. That leaves room for a lot of misinterpretation and hurt feelings.

Emojis were invented in Japan in the late 1990s. People had been using emoticons. They strung together symbols such as parentheses, dashes and colons to create visual expressions like :) for a smiley face. Where text took the empathy, or human emotion, out of messages, emojis and emoticons put it back in.

Emojis quickly surpassed emoticons, though, because people can communicate a lot more with emojis. “I can make a whale or a penguin,” said Internet language expert Gretchen McCulloch. “I don’t even know how I would do that with emoticons.”

How To Say What You Mean

Unicode is an international system that standardizes characters across different operating systems. Type “:-)” into your iPhone or Android phone, and the symbols automatically turn into a yellow smiley face. Thanks to Unicode, emojis became accessible and easy to use.

Linguist Neil Cohn researches how humans are programmed to use visual communication. In other words, people prefer drawing to convey their point. It’s no wonder communicating digitally with emojis is a no-brainer.

Language experts note that emojis also help people online say what they mean. When they write “What the heck?”, for example, they can include a laughing emoji or an angry-faced emoji. That detail communicates whether a person is amused or mad.

Things that are quickly adopted are likely to quickly disappear. Emojis fit so seamlessly into the way we communicate that linguists believe they are here to stay.
Anyone Can Suggest An Emoji

The Unicode Consortium is made up of the major software developing stakeholders such as Apple, Facebook, and Google. Anyone can submit a emoji request for free. It can take Unicode’s technical committee up to two years to accept a new emoji. About 100 proposals are received a year, and approval rates vary from year to year.

Seventy-four new emojis are being considered for 2016, including a dancing man, a croissant and pancakes.

“Digital communication is here to stay,” said Evans, the linguistics professor. “We’re all virtually connected, and we’re in the midst of a digital revolution. For it to be as successful as spoken language, it needs this kind of system to complement and support the messages coming from text.”
Quiz

1. Why were linguists not surprised by the selection of an emoji as the word of the year?
   (A) because they see how an emoji is a unit of meaning, like a word
   (B) because they always help choose the word of the year
   (C) because they have been studying emojis since their invention
   (D) because they were told of the choice before the public was

2. According to the article, why are emojis and emoticons used so often in texting?
   (A) They are short and do not waste space.
   (B) They add tone and feeling to a message.
   (C) People do not have to be able to read to understand them.
   (D) People can interpret them in many different ways.

3. Read the excerpt from the article.

   Bangor University linguistics professor Vyv Evans conducted a 2015 study. Evans found that 80 percent of smartphone users in Britain use emojis.

Which words BEST define "conducted" as used above?
   (A) to read and review
   (B) to design and run
   (C) to create and build
   (D) to communicate and share

4. Read the sentence from the article.

   Emojis quickly surpassed emoticons, though, because people can communicate a lot more with emojis.

Which word or phrase has the CLOSEST meaning to "surpassed" in the sentence?
   (A) imitated
   (B) created
   (C) fell short of
   (D) improved on