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The Role of Subtitles in Language Teaching

1. Introduction

Before embarking on a theoretical analysis of subtitling as a potential learning tool, it is well to attempt to clarify exactly what subtitles are from a learning perspective. We may consider subtitles a third channel of communication, in which the visual and the auditory are augmented by the textual[1]. The additive quality of subtitles from an informational point of view must be taken into consideration whenever we aim to evaluate the teaching potentialities offered by captions.

But there are other significant aspects of subtitles that we should be aware of when we consider using them in language teaching. They are obvious, and highly visible examples of overt translation (House 2009), which virtually pits the translator against the critic (and, of course, our students might quickly become informed critics of the quality of particular subtitles). Subtitling certainly presents translation choices in clear, bite-sized chunks for our evaluation. Pragmatically, subtitles are essentially adaptive, aiming at creating an equivalent dynamic effect rather than a literal one-for-one version of the original. This again might help students at various levels to consider the real (and often thorny) decisions translators face. The particular constraints of subtitling may also be revealing, especially the need for concision and high coherence. Questions of formality and normalisation will also almost inevitably arise in the observation of captions. While the fundamental issue (for subtitling) of synchronisation will seem of little immediate value to the 'average language student', the opportunity to concentrate on pronunciation (with intralingual captions) or contrastive analysis (with interlingual captions) could be exploited.

The literature on the use of subtitles in various language-learning settings is gradually becoming more substantial, even if empirical evidence for measurable benefits is inevitably scarce (it is notoriously difficult to 'prove' cognitive or educational gains,

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[1] The concept of third channel is seen from a teaching perspective; not, of course, from a semiotic one where we might consider captions to be a fifth channel, after the auditory non-verbal, auditory verbal, visual non-verbal and visual textual (e.g. signs and letters etc. in scenes). Here the semiotic analysis is perhaps of less use than the simpler pedagogic view.

and especially to claim that any improvement is purely to be ascribed to a particular teaching instrument or technique and not to other factors). Vanderplank (1988) mentions increased motivation, Talaván (2007) emphasizes the richness of contextual information provided by working with 'authentic' video with subtitles, while Caimi (2006) analyses both the advantages of intralingual subtitles in the learning environment (as opposed to interlingual captions) and the effects on memory and learning. Highly positive accounts of experiments in using subtitling activities in the classroom are almost becoming commonplace nowadays: a typical example is perhaps Beseghi (2013), while Bianchi (2015) provides an interesting study of the application of subtitling activities to a scientific English class, with both linguistic and content benefits.

2. Why use subtitles in language learning? Why now?

Various factors have encouraged the burgeoning use of subtitles as a learning and teaching tool in university (and secondary school) language courses in recent times. Perhaps most importantly, subtitled material (both intra- and inter-lingual) has become much more readily available. DVDs produced in the USA (and the UK, among other areas) are obliged to provide captions for the hearing impaired, and due to the very nature of DVD technology it is often not significantly more expensive to provide subtitles in various languages on the same disc[2]. Teachers and students find themselves in possession of a potentially wide-ranging library of subtitled material. This goes hand in hand with technological developments that have made producing captions relatively easy and improved their visual quality. In addition, the increasing popularity of fansubbing has broadened the choice of films and TV shows with subtitles yet further, and made it possible to access these within a very short time.

Changes in the technological and market context have gone hand in hand with developments in teaching practice: there is a strongly perceived need for variety in our teaching approaches (Ur 1996, 216) and it is fair to say that many language teachers are constantly on the lookout for alternative activities that are high in linguistic content but have a communicative feel, encourage group work or make use of task-based

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[2] CAIMI (2006) outlines the prevalence of subtitling (even ten years ago) reminding us that most British TV programming is subtitled and that Sky films are mostly captioned. While it is true, as she says, that live programmes are rarely presented with subtitles, we can note that most 24-hour news channels operate a 'newsbar' at the bottom of the screen (for example, Al Jazeera, France 24 etc.) that works in a way that is comparable to subtitles and might be exploited by teachers encouraging students to watch news broadcasts as learning activities.

methodology. Subtitling activities lend themselves well to current ideas about language teaching: they have 'real-world' characteristics, are potentially vocational (developing a marketable skill, in some cases) and seem to offer very manageable 'chunks' of language for a particular lesson or module.

Indeed, there are some highly valid reasons for introducing subtitles and subtitling activities into many different language classrooms. Subtitles offer an additional channel for the learner (textual in addition to auditory and visual). This can be considered advantageous in imparting information that will be comprehensible and, possibly, memorable. Gardner's work on multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993) and cognitive theories concerning language learning (outlined in Williams – Burden 1997, 13-20) stress the need to utilise more than one single medium in communication, especially when working with a class of numerous, different individuals. Subtitles grant this extra potential for reception, and this benefit comes combined with the longer-than-real-time screen presence of captions[3] (allowing listening comprehension activities with significant support to the aural channel). They also provide the affective safety-net that printed text gives for students often in need of a back-up or check for their understanding of spoken language. For a non-transparent language such as English, subtitles offer the very real advantage of constant, direct speech-to-written comparison giving teachers and students the opportunity to analyse phonological elements in detail, identify orthographic conventions and merely notice vocabulary or other linguistic features. There are, of course, many discrepancies between intralingual captions and the 'actual words' but these are themselves easily seen as effective sources for contrastive or critical analysis. Lastly, as we shall see later, subtitles sometimes offer an additional narrative level, beyond the story, which can be exploited in class, or can be observed in comic or politically contentious video productions.

The case for using subtitles as a language teaching tool may thus seem compelling, but before attempting to ground their use in a more principled manner, some pedagogical objections that have been raised should be noted. Subtitles are often described as not being well-received by audiences because they require effort (reading rather than 'just watching' a film) and tend to interrupt the narrative flow of a production. They also risk reducing or compromising the authenticity of a viewing experience (taking us 'out of the story'). Along with these general objections to subtitles, peda-

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[3] Text remains on the screen for about 5-6 seconds, which actually gives the student more time to check and examine lexis than just using the passing auditory channel. Perhaps we can also suggest that text is more 'highlighted' in subtitles than in traditional longer written input used in class.

gogical criticisms have been raised: there is a danger of making students lazy (cf. Cook 2010, 150) or text-dependent (what will they do when faced with a video without captions?), or overloading students with excessive information at the same time.

However, most of these doubts can be quite effectively scotched (see Talaván 2007 for a clear defence of using subtitles in a language class, quoting Vanderplank 1988). Effort can be overcome with repeated exposure and thus creating habit, and flow will presumably be less affected with familiarity. Any effort required in watching subtitled video might be considered a simple benefit in that use of film in class is never supposed to be a cognitive 'holiday' for participants. This connects with what Caimi (2006) refers to as the «touch of intentional purposefulness» in language lesson video use. Being pulled out of the story by written blocks of text appearing at regular intervals could even be seen as an advantage. It might be a significant teaching tool that can be exploited particularly effectively to focus on issues of discourse, pragmatics, narrative devices and such like. Information overload is also only a superficially convincing counterargument: research suggests (for example, quoted by Caimi 2006, 87) the opposite. Reading subtitles has been described as freeing up processing capacity and enabling deeper consideration of the language used. Certainly with effective pre-teaching and supportive, well-structured activities (Caimi 2006) there is little justification for the assumption that captions force our students to do too much[4].

3. A valid use of subtitles?

Use of subtitles in class, for all its appeal, can be described as varied and, perhaps, patchy. Besides exploitation as a component in translation courses, offering explicit training in producing captions with an obvious surrender value, teaching applications have received critical attention (see, for example, Díaz Cintas − Fernández Cruz 2008 for general language acquisition, and Pavesi − Perego 2008 for 'educational' subtitling). Activities involving the making of new subtitles (e.g. Beseghi 2013) as task-based learning and group or project work are described in the literature, often with strong claims as to motivation and positive evaluations (Williams − Thorne 2000). Sometimes experimental projects are described as contributions to research (e.g. Caimi 2006). Understandably, there is not a great deal in the way of a clear methodology for using subtitles. Aims may be different, but usually coalesce around the nodes of devel-

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[4] It is also worth noting that many students have little difficulty in dealing with the presence of subtitles and captioned information (often even interlingual text) in numerous video games!

oping translation and revision skills, improving comprehension and enhancing vocabulary learning (Caimi 2006 and Talaván 2007).

Perhaps it would be wise at this juncture to question the status quo regarding the use of subtitles in language teaching. Aims but usually involve the development of lexis and improving listening skills. As we shall see, these are notoriously difficult areas to evaluate. Firstly, though, it might be well to take a second look at the idea of creating subtitles. There is an obvious natural appeal to a procedure that produces an explicit, potentially satisfying output and uses language centrally to achieve it. However, creating captions might be criticised as being excessively time-consuming, and possibly too difficult cognitively (are we asking students to 'jump' from the bottom to the top of Bloom's taxonomy (1956) in one fell swoop?). Problems intrinsic to group work in language learning contexts are perhaps also due for reassessment: how *real* are the tasks? How much are we focussed on *product* and how much on *process*? Are all our students truly adequately engaged? Will the final product be a reliable and valid assessment tool for the whole procedure?

Clearly stated aims which move beyond somewhat vague references to motivation and the glitzy appeal of technology will help us to measure the true effectiveness of subtitles as an instructional tool. We should outline principled reasons for deciding to use them and thus equip ourselves with a yardstick to assess their value. If we are interested in lexis, for example, the objective should perhaps be deepening vocabulary rather than merely expanding it, or merely increasing recognition (cf. Zarei – Rashvand 2011). Testing will need to be complex enough to reflect the richness involved, both in the original exposure and in the kind of words, ideas and meanings that will have been retained. It is of little use singing the praises of the moving image for lexical development if we cannot measure the benefits in some way (Talaván 2007 is clearly positive on this point, and can be seen as typical).

This brings us to the difficult question of how to assess effectiveness. Always a difficult aspect of any enquiry into methodology, the task of attempting to research the results (cognitive and linguistic) of using subtitles as a learning tool are beset with problems. This is because subtitles largely work with comprehension, which is notoriously difficult to measure as it is invisible as a cognitive 'fact': we can only measure the effects of understanding, not the understanding itself (Williams – Burden 1997; Hughes 1989, 116). Our only option is indirect evaluation. The situation is even more complicated when we try to understand development in vocabulary. There is a marked tendency to measure vocabulary recognition or retention, probably because

these are countable (Caimi 2006, 86 quotes Benjamin 2005 and Unsworth – Engle 2005, for example), but these approaches to assessing lexical development fly in the face of the very advantages proposed by proponents of subtitles as learning aids. Tests are often discrete-item, aimed at simple recognition or definitions, and are invariably paper-and-pencil assessments bearing only limited relation to the video-based experience of the original vocabulary exposure. This is not intended to be harsh criticism of the papers that have gamely attempted to evaluate the utility of subtitles, but rather a word of caution: if we are to assess the cognitive or linguistic value of subtitled exposure to language, we have to be modest in our faith in test instruments and recognise their shortcomings. We should not lose sight of the linguistic depth, rich contextualisation and kinaesthetic wholeness that the auditory-visual-textual channels offer. It is also worth mentioning that all attempts that concentrate (quite reasonably) on cognitive or strictly linguistic benefits may essentially 'miss the point' as they underestimate or ignore the complexity of the learning experience which will (potentially) include affective elements, greater interaction with story and greater opportunity for analysis (on various levels, presented explicitly)[5].

Consideration of cognitive aspects and the problematic element of evaluation, however brief, brings us back to other, quite practical, issues concerning what happens in a language classroom when subtitling activities are employed. In group work, for example, it might be much more effective to assess the involvement of each participant and the distribution of roles, the quantity and quality of language used during the process, and the individual feelings of students, rather than simply to examine the final captions produced or the lexis explicitly recalled, if we aim to evaluate the quality of this activity as a language learning tool. There is a risk of being 'seduced' by the sheer concreteness of the subtitled video of one group or another, with our interest in what went on during the whole project being diminished, or being lost in a general, vague feeling that it was a 'good' or 'fun' exercise. Perhaps this is an occasion when process is just as important at product. We are dealing with what is essentially a 'long' activity, probably involving stages of familiarisation with captions, learning the 'nuts and bolts' of software, informed analysis and critique of existing subtitles and finally working on the chosen clip (see, for example, Beseghi 2013). So it is all the more crucial that we as teachers or facilitators dedicate enough resources and knowledge to

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[5] One interesting exception is the study by MITTERER – MCQUEEN (2009) that suggests intralingual subtitles helped students in recognizing and dealing with different accents in English. Accent being a classic example of richness and complexity in language and a reminder that one 'cannot live by simple vocabulary recognition alone' and that subtitles may even help in subtle aspects of language development.

attempting to determine the features of the procedure itself, and how effective they might be didactically when we attempt to evaluate subtitling as a learning instrument.

A last, and significant issue has to do with the applicability of results and findings. Researching a topic such as this exposes the reader to studies carried out in various institutions and all over the globe. While this makes for potentially greater reliability in the research, it raises practical questions as to how much one study can really say for the learning experience of another, very different (linguistically and culturally speaking) group. What works for Dutch speakers learning English, or Chinese students, might have little real relevance for Italians or Peruvians. The universal applicability of certain tools and techniques (especially of certain cognitive 'facts') may well be a reality but this requires demonstration. We can agree that our common target is the learning of English, but we would still do well to be cautious with the idea that the same activities will work and be beneficial for all. This consideration will quite obviously affect our choice of materials for a particular group (age, culture and institution, for example, might decide whether a certain film or comedy show was appropriate or not). These aspects may be important from a pedagogical and cognitive point of view as well. We are moving away from a one-size-fits-all methodology in language teaching (see, for example, Williams – Burden 1997, 88-141), and adoption and evaluation of subtitles as tools should reflect this.

4. Methodological choices

If, to some extent, the jury is still out as regards the evaluation of projects and lessons using subtitles, this should only be a note of caution. Research published up to now shows a clear positive tendency to encouraging teachers to employ subtitles and related activities (Caimi 2006; Talaván 2007; Pavesi – Perego 2008; Bianchi 2015 et al.). It is important therefore to try to clarify from a methodological perspective what we should be doing with captions. Put simply, this paper would like to suggest that rather than using subtitles because they might constitute a helpful tool for learning, they should be used for their intrinsic qualities, exploiting their features in ways which rely, not on what might happen (almost by accident, and in an unknowable way, cognitively speaking), but on what definitely does occur. In other words, the important thing is the subtitles themselves.

This suggests that one of the first stated aims of using captions in class would be to train our students to be good subtitle readers, breaking down any reticence or fear

that might exist due to supposed extra effort or missing something important in the visual part of the film. This is especially important in dubbing countries such as Italy where great emphasis is placed on the skills of the dubbing industry and the presumed difficulty of watching subtitled video. A successful use of subtitles might be measured by student attitudes to dubbing and subtitles after use in class. And even more so if students are found to choose subtitled rather than dubbed material in the future.

Caimi (2006, 86) stresses the importance of pre- and post- teaching, and this can have the additional benefit of giving the teacher anecdotal evidence of the effects of using subtitles in class. Follow-up activities offer both a summary and reworking of things learned and an insight for the teacher into what learning has actually gone on. Here we might mention note-taking as a specific skill that could be worked on while using subtitled material (with perhaps more practical options for evaluation). Captions may also be a boon when exposing students to input that might be considered 'too hard'. In CLIL classes, for example, subtitled documentaries are an invaluable asset, offering alternative presentations of content, *in lingua* and with written support. The famed concision of subtitles may also help students in developing note-taking skills, refining the ability to sift and select salient detail.

Naturally, translation analysis and practice will be another direct application of the use of subtitles: they offer bite-sized chunks for observation and critique and are highly contextualised (Cook 2010, 143). Students can be encouraged to reflect on linguistic choices made and discuss their own. Of course, production of subtitles represents a most reasonable option, but perhaps we should as teachers hope to inculcate two things here: better linguistic understanding arising from the hands-on experience of making captions, and the temptation to do it again, out of school (i.e. producing fansubs). If students are unwilling to 'go it alone' after a project, then at least a more subtle awareness of how captions can compromise or misrepresent meaning should be a goal. In other words, we are not using captions just because they seem to be an attractive and productive thing to do on a course, but because they offer the chance for students to acquire language, discourse and life-relevant skills that they will carry with them out of the classroom (cf. Williams – Burden 1997, 204). Again, the product represented by a nicely made set of captions might well be of less value than the process involved in getting there and the critical skills acquired on the journey.

The intrinsic features of subtitles that offer significant learning opportunities should not be overlooked. All on-screen captions lend themselves to close observation of prosody, intonation and pragmatics as they make explicit comparison between the

textual and the other elements of linguistic interaction (see Taylor 2003 for a thorough methodological approach to this). It is worth remembering that the speech act tends to be highly in focus in subtitling. In many ways we can say that intentions and effects are more important than individual and isolated items of lexis in each caption. Fiction offers highly credible interactions that can serve as exemplification of behavior, and textual support can aid us in observing and explaining this. Even when the actions might be considered to be exaggerated, they can be useful as representations of behaviour. Gesticulation comes to mind as an obvious example, but there are many more that are more subtle (how questions are intoned in British, American, Australian English, for example, or how anger, shock or pleasure are commonly expressed). Caimi (2006, 88) refers to this when she talks of «simulated authentic interpersonal communication». Pragmatics, and 'what we really say in certain situations' are visibly portrayed in film and TV and can represent an enjoyable, but at the same time, educational exposure to subtle situational language. Not only the lexis, but also the timing, intonation and modes of delivery of a particular idiomatic expression or set phrase are exemplified. The highly ironic portrayal of British pragmatic expectations in the *Black Books* "Team Leader" episode[6], in which the protagonist repeatedly fails to obey the most obvious rules of social interaction, offers a rich potential source using very simple linguistic content, allowing teachers to expose low level students (even A2 of the CEFR, perhaps) to pragmatic issues and increase awareness of an important aspect of language.

Higher level issues that can be addressed with subtitled material include the extra narrative level they offer (captions can even be used creatively in contrast to what is being said as a narrative 'trick', as exemplified in the comedy *The IT Crowd* in which, on one occasion, incorrect translation wrecks a business meeting[7]). On a perhaps more serious note, it is worth recognising the importance of subtitles in the current geopolitical climate: with suitable class observation, a subtitled video produced by ISIS offers a great deal of scope for discourse analysis, all the more so as a whole genre of doctored ISIS videos is available online. Baker (2006, 99f.) offers a very interesting discussion of the subtitles creatively applied to a video documentary concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict[8]. Naturally teachers may be constrained by institutional con-

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[6] Channel Four TV, Series 3, episode 1, 2013.

[7] Channel Four TV, Series 4, episode 4, 2010.

[6] As a footnote it is worth mentioning a recent scandal during the American Republican Party primaries in spring 2016: Mr. Cruz sacked a campaign manager after a supposedly doctored video of an opponent was released where the original words of the speaker were difficult to hear and so subtitled (but altered

ditions, but it is clear how much a debate about subtitle choices can offer and how real the discussion will be. This may grant greater authenticity to the learning experience than the assumed authenticity of a task-based subtitle production activity, where there will always be an underlying doubt as to whether anyone will use the captions created.

5. Benefits of using subtitles in language teaching

There are thus clear benefits offered by using subtitles, but these may be a little different from what is assumed in most of the literature. For so-called 'dubbing countries' there is the promise of increased authenticity in the watching experience and a greater closeness to the original, with any domestication in captions being obviated by the presence of the original soundtrack, preserving all its peculiarities. The opportunities for increasing cultural awareness (or simply curiosity) are clear, but we can also emphasise the chance to empower our students, granting them greater critical awareness of the mediation that occurs in transferring a film or video from one culture to another. Besides any errors in translation that may be identified, there is a more interesting level of analysis which may be narratological, or even political.

Naturally, subtitles present chunks of language that are in context (both visually and aurally) and can be used to encourage text analysis that takes account of contextual elements. Here we might mention indexicality (see especially Blommaert 2005), which is generally little taught or understood and certainly underestimated as a linguistic skill. To decipher messages effectively we need an appreciation of social and political signals contained in the choices speakers make (of lexis, register, accent and intonation, not to mention overt references, proper names and the like). Again, the explicit nature of subtitles offers potentially invaluable support in our attempts to grapple with these complex elements of coherence in language. Subtitles give lingering visible evidence of cohesive devices, register choices and coherent referents in rich context, helping to make them comprehensible, and (*pace* our earlier comments regarding cognitive research) perhaps more memorable.

The extra narrative layer subtitles offer may be exploited by the artwork itself, or by teachers and students. Subtitles represent a three-way dynamic of understanding, working on visual and aural levels and producing an accompanying translation or

significantly). Reported in *The Guardian*, "Ted Cruz fires top staffer for spreading false story about Marco Rubio and Bible" 22nd February 2016.

commentary (or ironic counterpoint). This is an ideal introduction to exploring narrative strategy, as well as constituting a significant teaching goal in itself, helping our learners to consciously examine video presented on TV, on the internet or on film. These skills fit with the idea that when we teach language we do not merely teach language, but many other socially and culturally important issues as well (Williams – Burden 1997, 204). An opening for teaching critical thinking skills beckons.

6. Conclusion

The intention of this paper is not to criticise the current practice of using subtitling projects as an effective language learning strategy. On the contrary, these task-based approaches are recognised as potentially motivating, linguistically demanding and productive activities (for example, Bianchi 2015). Instead, our aim here is to emphasise just how much more subtitles may offer to the language classroom, by their very nature and due to their growing prevalence or availability. Perhaps the complexity and richness of opportunity represented by subtitles has been underestimated up to now.

Subtitled films or TV shows are, by definition, less localising and more exotic than dubbed films, and offer a constant dynamic contrast between written and spoken English (with intralingual subtitles) or between English and the target language (in the case of interlingual subtitles). These will contain highly motivational elements if we are adept enough to exploit them. Discussion of translation choices is an obvious starting point (Cook 2010), but a teacher may go further and explore the characteristics of the original culture, the assumptions made (especially in fiction, perhaps, when assumptions must be credible and so rely on repeatedly-used index features in a language), and the forms of interaction used.

Of course, subtitles do offer a partial simplification of the linguistic difficulties presented by many works on video. The support of a textual 'translation' can offer both reassurance and an instant explanation of difficult lexis. The potential benefits for the CLIL classroom are clear. But this also gives us as teachers the priceless opportunity to take the learners out of the classroom and beyond the everyday, using materials that would otherwise be considered 'too hard'. Language need not be pre-planned examples of grammatical forms or 'important vocabulary' but will instead be richly contextualised and intrinsically interesting. This in turn offers us the chance to facilitate the creation of meaningful learning experiences, demanding active and attentive participation on the part of our viewers and learners. At the same time we can emphasise

the all-important part language plays in society, and how subtle and significant certain linguistic choices can be.

Learners can become aware of the many different ways to tell a story, and this story might be a currently debated, historically significant event, rather than just a set-up discussion about how greenhouse gases endanger the earth. Bruner (1990) underlines the absolute importance of narrative in our social understanding, and developing our understanding of this process of narrative may be considered to be a valuable educational goal in itself. It is also worth suggesting that *creating* narratives, and making them our own, might render our learning more memorable in a way that is more profound than the mere advantage offered by a visual-kinaesthetic addition to vocabulary presentation that a video usually offers.

The fact that many original linguistic features are preserved in subtitled video (pronunciation and intonation, accent, and even features such as errors and false-starts – often explicitly described in accompanying captions) makes this medium much more valuable as a language resource. We do not need to tell our students about common variations in speech or common non-standard forms because they can discover them for themselves in their observations.

We have seen that it is difficult to demonstrate the greater effectiveness of lexical learning through subtitles conclusively (although the anecdotal evidence is suggestive and teachers might tend to perceive it as being true), but we can claim with some certainty that authenticity enables learning (Williams – Burden 1997). If genuine emotions, conflicts and humour only exist in real life rather than in the classroom (where they are usually created rather unconvincingly for the needs of a particular language exercise or role-play), then effectively mediated fictions are perhaps an authentic way to represent experience and felt-life in a typical language-learning situation. Subtitles can assist us in our attempt to enrich the linguistic experiences of our students and, at the same time, shed a clear spotlight on what is going on when we use language. That they provide a third way to tell the story makes them all the more useful to us.

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