

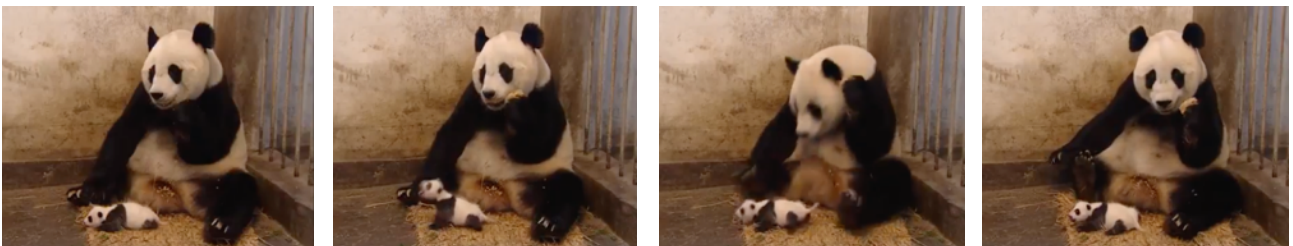


A story-based approach to video

# VIDEO AND LANGUAGE

## An unexpected interruption

For a while, the most viewed animal video on the internet was a mysterious 15-second static shot of two pandas and an unexpected interruption. Perhaps you remember it?



### Try this

Watch the video two or three times. Then imagine that you are going to describe it to a friend who has never seen it before. Write a short monologue as if you are putting the video narrative into your own spoken words. Alternatively, capture your videotelling performance on camera, create a talking head video and then transcribe it.

Keep your text handy, as we will be coming back to it shortly.

Scan or click the code  
to see the video



## What happens next?

In 2007, in response to the emergence of YouTube, I started a blog called TEFLclips. This was a place for me to share ideas for using online video in the classroom.

One of the first ideas was a video prediction activity that involved the panda video. The basic idea was for the teacher to play the first few seconds of the video, pause it and ask students to guess what happens next.

After a few predictions, we would watch the whole video and establish that:

**The baby panda sneezes and the mummy panda gets a fright.**

A few weeks after posting, my blog post received a comment. It was a question from a teacher who wanted to know why I had chosen to teach “get a fright”. In his opinion, this was a low-frequency phrase and therefore not suitable for lower-level students.

I could see the teacher’s point. The problem was, however, that in my mind, “get a fright” was the perfect language choice for the situation. I genuinely couldn’t think of a better way to express what happens to the big panda.

I wonder what you think about this. Have a look at the text you wrote. How did you choose to describe the big panda’s reaction? Did you use “get a fright”? Or did you express it in a different way?

A few years later, still driven by curiosity, I devised a simple way to put this to the test.

## The panda test

In 2013, I started to ask friends, family members, colleagues, acquaintances and even complete strangers to put the panda video into words.

If they were already familiar with the video, I asked them to describe it from memory. If they had never seen it before, I would show it to them first. In each case, I filmed their responses.





As mentioned, I was specifically interested to see how people would describe the mother panda's reaction. Out of the 33 subjects I filmed, can you guess how many of them used the phrase "get a fright"?

## The results

Here are excerpts from the 33 video transcripts, the moment at which each person describes the big panda's reaction.

- **Ben:** ... and she's really, really shocked and she just sort of jumps out of her skin – if a panda could jump out of its skin.
- **Jono:** And mamma panda nearly chokes on her bamboo.
- **Atinc:** ... that makes her mother frightened.
- **Chris:** The mother just looks really shocked, goes [gesture].
- **Daen:** Mum surprise!
- **Ed:** Upon which the mother panda freaks out, seems literally to jump off the ground and into the air.
- **Anne:** ... and the mother panda gets a fright and jumps.
- **Jelena:** ... and scares the hell out of his giant mummy.
- **Jules:** ... and the mother jumps.
- **Duaa:** ... and the mother gets shocked or surprised by the sneeze.
- **Ranin:** ... and the mother panda was like [gesture].
- **Andrew:** ... and the mother goes [gesture].
- **Jarawan:** The mother was shocked – she jumped.
- **Mays:** ... and she gets so surprised.
- **Richard:** ... and the reaction of the big panda was immediately to lean forward and wonder, I suppose, what it was all about and jumped.
- **Jack:** Mummy panda gets a big fright.
- **Hannah:** ... and the big mummy panda goes [gesture]. It's very terrified.
- **Melissa:** ... and it frightens the mother.
- **Elisa:** ... and the mother gets frightened and then it's all over again.
- **Simon:** ... and the mother freaks out, it's like [gesture].
- **Susie:** ... and the mummy panda gets a fright and jumps.
- **Eduardo:** The baby panda just jumps. It's really scared.
- **Maddy:** ... and the mamma panda did this [gesture].
- **Unknown:** ... and she gives the mother a big panic and she just jumps and it's really funny.
- **Rollo:** ... which shocks the mother panda and she shits herself.
- **Milo:** The mother panda wakes up startled.
- **Andrea:** The mother panda also jumps because she's terrified.
- **Cathy:** It's such a loud sneeze that it wakens the mummy panda and the baby panda both are pretty shocked by this massive sneeze.
- **Sedef:** ... and the mother panda ... gets afraid.
- **Tim:** ... and the large panda [gesture] freaks out.
- **Vicky:** ... which literally makes the mother jump out of her skin.
- **Rai:** ... and the mother panda was surprised.
- **Alastair:** Mummy panda gets a big fright.

I wonder what you think of all this. Are you at all surprised at the variety of language used to describe the big panda's reaction?

It's interesting to note that a number of people used gestures in addition to words.



*And the mother panda was like ...*  
(Ranin)



*The mother just looks really shocked, goes ...*  
(Chris)

So what about “get a fright”? If you read the excerpts carefully, you will have seen that exactly four people used this phrase and they were Anne, Jack, Susie and Alastair.

For me, there is something quite incredible about this: those people are my parents and my siblings.



My mother,  
Anne



My father,  
Jack



My sister,  
Susie



My brother,  
Alastair

As an English language teacher, I learned two valuable lessons here:

**i. Language diversity:** Just as comprehension is divergent, so are language choices. There is only one “Sneezing Baby Panda” video but there are as many ways to describe it as there are human beings on the planet.

**ii. Speech communities:** Everyone belongs to a speech community, and some people belong to more than one. My own speech community includes my parents, my siblings and other people from middle-class Edinburgh families. Members of a speech community share a common set of language norms and practices. They use the same language or dialect and follow similar rules for speaking it. As we can see from this informal experiment, despite the diversity of language at our disposal, the specific words and phrases we choose can be influenced by the speech community (or communities) to which we belong.

## Language of videotelling

Now, let's focus on three of the video transcripts and look for common language features and patterns within them.



Jules



Ed



Elisa

### 💡 Try this

Read the three video transcripts below and on the next page. Try to identify five features of language that are relevant to storytelling in general. In particular, look for things that will be useful for your students when you set up similar videotelling tasks in the classroom. Pay attention to any or all of the following:

- Register (i.e. the level of formality of language, given the situation)
- Grammar
- Features of spoken English
- Structure and organisation of the monologues
- Useful storytelling devices

### **Transcript one:** Jules (English first language)

*OK, so there's this really funny clip on YouTube which I had never seen before.*

*And it's quite sweet because it's a mother panda, sitting, just munching bamboo.*

*Pandas have to eat a lot of bamboo.*

*They have to eat all day because of their nutritional needs.*

*And just in front of her, lying down, is this incredibly sweet little baby panda.*

*And anyway the clip goes on for a couple of seconds.*

*And all you can hear is the noise of her crunching the bamboo.*

*And then suddenly, there's this extraordinarily loud sneeze that comes from the baby panda.*

*You wouldn't think something so tiny could make such a huge noise.*

*And the mother jumps.*

*I didn't know animals could do that.*

*I suppose it's a bit like, can animals dream?*

*And anyway, then the baby goes back to sleep and the mother relaxes.*

*And that's it – it takes about 17 seconds.*

*It's very funny.*

**Transcript two:** Ed (English first language)

*So the video is, I guess, filmed in a zoo and you see a panda.  
 The first thing you notice is a panda bear, sitting upright, with her legs open.  
 And she seems to be munching something, eating something.  
 And you can hear this chewing, quite rhythmically ...  
 [Demonstrates the sound of the chewing.]  
 And then you look down and you see that between the panda's legs ...  
 There's a baby panda that's lying – sleeping – very, very small.  
 And suddenly, after a while, the baby panda shudders and sneezes and makes a very, very  
 high-pitched sneezing noise.  
 Upon which the mother panda freaks out.  
 And seems literally to jump off the ground, into the air.  
 And it takes you by surprise when you see it.  
 And the first thing you need to do is to see it again to say, "What the hell just happened?"*

**Transcript three:** Elisa (German first language)

*This video's about a panda.  
 It's probably a mother panda, sitting there in its box – its cage – eating something.  
 Maybe it's a bread – it could be a bread or ...  
 Maybe some kind of bamboo thing or plant or something.  
 And there's this little baby lying in front of her, if it's a her – if it's the mother.  
 Maybe the baby's sleeping – we're not sure.  
 But I think the eyes are closed.  
 And then suddenly, unexpectedly, there's some noise and the baby moves.  
 And the mother gets frightened and then it's all over again.  
 It happens so quickly then ...  
 Before you can think about it, it's all over.  
 And that's the story.*

You can scan or click the code to meet Jules, Ed and Elisa. But for the purposes of this task, we are focusing on the language of the transcripts, rather than aspects of non-verbal communication.



## Four language features

How did you get on? Let's start with four features of language that relate to all three transcripts.

### i. Tense

	Present narrative	Past narrative
Most frequent	Present simple	Past simple
	Present continuous	Past continuous
	Present perfect	Past perfect
Least frequent	Present perfect continuous	Past perfect continuous

When putting video narratives into words, the present narrative is a natural choice. This is exactly what we would expect if we were reading a film synopsis or a screenplay. And this is what we get from Jules, Ed and Elisa, all three of whom describe the sneezing baby panda video using present simple and present continuous structures.

By telling a story in the present narrative, we create a sense of immediacy, making the events feel like they are happening right now. This can contribute to a more immersive experience for the listener. It can also create a sense of timelessness, suggesting that the video narrative is not confined to a specific moment in the past but is universally relevant.

That is not to say that it would be wrong to use the past narrative to describe a video like this. Of the 33 subjects who took part in my informal experiment, exactly five of them spoke in the past narrative. This created a slightly different effect, however. It was almost as if those subjects were describing an event that they had just witnessed in person.

In the classroom, I suggest that students describe videos like the sneezing baby panda in the present narrative, unless they have a good reason to do otherwise.

### ii. Aspect

We are used to talking about nouns as either things or stuff. For, example, you might say that watermelon is your favourite fruit. You might prepare a bowl of chopped watermelon for dessert. Or you might take some watermelon to the beach. In these cases, you are not thinking about whole watermelons and you are using the word in its uncountable form. You see it as stuff.



On the other hand, if you were a fruit seller, you might place an order for a box of watermelons. Or if you were zoo keeper, you might give the hippopotamuses a treat by feeding them whole watermelons, a spectacle that you can see on YouTube. In these cases, you are thinking of whole units and you are using the word in its countable form.



By analogy, verbs are similar: they have different forms that can be used to describe complete actions (e.g. “I saw the panda *eat* some bamboo.”) or dynamic, ongoing situations (e.g. “I saw the panda *eating* some bamboo.”)

This is the fundamental difference between simple and continuous structures, regardless of whether we are dealing with past or present. In their simple or basic form, verbs generally refer to actions that we see as complete; in their -ing form, verbs generally refer to situations that we see as dynamic and ongoing.

This area of grammar is referred to as “aspect”. It refers to the dynamics of the verb and it should not be confused with tense, which is about time.

So what does this have to do with the sneezing baby panda video? Well, almost all of the 33 people who described it took some time to set the scene before the action. This required lots of open, ongoing -ing form verbs:

Jules	<i>And it's quite sweet because it's a mother panda, <b>sitting</b>, just <b>munching</b> bamboo. And just in front of her, <b>lying</b> down, is this incredibly sweet little baby panda. And all you can hear is the noise of her <b>crunching</b> the bamboo.</i>
Ed	<i>The first thing you notice is a panda bear, <b>sitting</b> upright, with her legs open. And she seems to be <b>munching</b> something, <b>eating</b> something. And you can hear this <b>chewing</b>, quite rhythmically ... And then you look down and you see that between the panda's legs ... There's a baby panda that's <b>lying</b> – <b>sleeping</b> – very, very small.</i>
Elisa	<i>It's probably a mother panda, <b>sitting</b> there in its box – its cage – <b>eating</b> something. And there's this little baby <b>lying</b> in front of her. Maybe the baby's <b>sleeping</b> – we're not sure.</i>

Once the scene has been set, it's time for the interesting part – a series of closed actions that start with the sneeze. In their transcripts, you can see that Jules, Ed and Elisa express these as a series of simple structures.

Jules	<i>And then suddenly, there's this extraordinarily loud sneeze that <b>comes</b> from the baby panda. And the mother <b>jumps</b>. And anyway, then the baby <b>goes</b> back to sleep and the mother <b>relaxes</b>.</i>
Ed	<i>And suddenly, after a while, the baby panda <b>shudders</b> and <b>sneezes</b> and <b>makes</b> a very, very high-pitched sneezing noise. Upon which the mother panda <b>freaks</b> out.</i>
Elisa	<i>And then suddenly, unexpectedly, there's some noise and the baby <b>moves</b>. And the mother <b>gets</b> frightened and then it's all over again.</i>

In the language classroom, we often teach this grammar point with invented examples like, “I was having a shower when the doorbell rang”. But simple action videos like the sneezing baby panda provide us with a more meaningful context for this specific language point to emerge.

### iii. Register of spoken English

In their videos, Jules, Ed and Elisa use friendly and conversational language. Compare their transcripts with this more formal text from "Know Your Meme", a website that documents internet memes and viral phenomena.

Sneezing Baby Panda is a viral video uploaded to YouTube on November 6th, 2006 that depicts a mother panda at the Wolong Panda Breeding Centre munching on bamboo while her baby cub sleeps at her feet. Out of nowhere, the baby sneezes, startling the mother for a second before she returns to her food.



Formal language choices	Informal language choices
[The video] depicts a mother panda ...	<i>This video's about a panda ...</i> (Elisa)
her baby cub	<i>this incredibly sweet little baby panda</i> (Jules)
... startling the mother	<i>... the mother panda freaks out</i> (Ed)

There are other things that relate to register. For example, when Jules, Ed and Elisa describe the sneezing baby panda video, they become an inseparable part of the story they tell. All three of them make reference to their own viewing experiences:

Jules	<i>There's this really funny clip on YouTube which I had never seen before.</i>
Ed	<i>And the first thing you need to do is to see it again to say, "What the hell just happened?"</i>
Elisa	<i>It happens so quickly then ... Before you can think about it, it's all over.</i>

On the other hand, the website text is impersonal and more neutral. We know nothing about the writer's opinions or experiences of the viral video.

There are also grammatical features we could take into account. For example, Jules, Ed and Elisa use many constructions that exploit "it" as a so-called "dummy subject". These are much less frequent in more formal registers.

Jules	<i>And <b>it's</b> quite sweet because <b>it's</b> a mother panda ...</i>
Ed	<i>And <b>it</b> takes you by surprise when you see it.</i>
Elisa	<i><b>It</b> happens so quickly then ... before you can think about it, <b>it's</b> all over.</i>

## vi. Hedging

All three storytellers make use of hedging words and phrases. These mark their uncertainty about the facts or information that they are reporting and are shown in bold:

Jules	<i>I <b>suppose</b> it's a bit like, can animals dream?</i>
Ed	<i>So the video is, <b>I guess</b>, filmed in a zoo and you see a panda. And <b>she seems to be</b> munching something, eating something. And <b>seems</b> literally to jump off the ground, into the air.</i>
Elisa	<i>It's <b>probably</b> a mother panda, sitting there in its box – its cage – eating something. <b>Maybe</b> it's a bread – <b>it could be</b> a bread or ... <b>Maybe some kind of</b> bamboo thing or plant <b>or something</b>. And there's this little baby lying in front of her, if it's a her – <b>if it's the mother</b>. <b>Maybe</b> the baby's sleeping – <b>we're not sure</b>. But <b>I think</b> the eyes are closed.</i>

## Four storytelling devices

Now let's look at four useful devices that Jules, Ed and Elisa use to tell their stories.

### i. "This" to introduce a new idea

When telling a story, it is usual to use "this" or "these" to introduce new ideas.

Jules	<i>OK, so there's <b>this</b> really funny clip on YouTube which I had never seen before. And just in front of her, lying down, is <b>this</b> incredibly sweet little baby panda. And then suddenly, there's <b>this</b> extraordinarily loud sneeze that comes from the baby panda.</i>
Ed	<i>And you can hear <b>this</b> chewing, quite rhythmically ...</i>
Elisa	<i>And there's <b>this</b> little baby lying in front of her, if it's a her – if it's the mother.</i>

Learners of English can sometimes fail to notice this detail and will overuse the first person singular in cases like this (e.g. "In the video, I can see a panda").

## ii. Use of the second person

When telling a story like this, it is common to involve the audience in a broad or inclusive manner using the second person:

Jules	<i>And all <b>you</b> can hear is the noise of her crunching the bamboo. <b>You</b> wouldn't think something so tiny could make such a huge noise.</i>
Ed	<i>So the video is, I guess, filmed in a zoo and <b>you</b> see a panda. The first thing <b>you</b> notice is a panda bear, sitting upright, with her legs open. And <b>you</b> can hear this chewing, quite rhythmically ... And then <b>you</b> look down and you see that between the panda's legs ... And it takes <b>you</b> by surprise when you see it. And the first thing <b>you</b> need to do is to see it again ...</i>
Elisa	<i>Before <b>you</b> can think about it, it's all over.</i>

## iii Anyway

Jules' text illustrates a discourse marker that can be very useful for storytelling. After a digression, we can use "anyway" to come back to the narrative.

Jules	<i>And the mother jumps. I didn't know animals could do that. I suppose it's a bit like, can animals dream? And <b>anyway</b>, then the baby goes back to sleep and the mother relaxes.</i>
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## vi. Fronting

Look at the way Jules, Ed and Elisa introduce us to the baby panda. One of them is different to the others. Can you see which is the odd one out and why?

Jules	<i>And just in front of her, lying down, is this incredibly sweet little baby panda.</i>
Ed	<i>And then you look down and you see that between the panda's legs ... There's a baby panda that's lying – sleeping – very, very small.</i>
Elisa	<i>And there's this little baby lying in front of her,</i>

The answer is that Elisa is the odd one out. She is the only one who does not use fronting here. If she had used fronting, her sentence would have looked like this:

*And lying in front of her, there's this little baby.*

Fronting is a device that can be especially useful in storytelling. It refers to any construction in which a word or phrase, which usually follows the verb, is placed at the beginning of the sentence.

To put it another way, fronting allows the important thing (in this case the baby panda) to come at the end. Here are two more famous examples:

- “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” (From *The Hobbit*)
- “In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf.” (From *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*)

### Try this

Go back to the text that you wrote at the beginning of this unit. Read it carefully and answer the following questions:

- Did you describe the video in the present or past narrative?
- Did you make use of -ing form verbs to set the scene, and simple structures to describe the actions as Jules, Ed, and Elisa did?
- Did you use any hedging words or phrases?
- Do you feel that the language you used is friendly and conversational?
- Did you make use of “this” or “these” to introduce new ideas?
- Did you tell parts of the story in the second person?
- Did you use fronting?

If you were to repeat the task, would you make any changes to your text?

## Language, stereotypes and social perceptions

In order to put a video or image into words, we often have to rely on our personal experience and world knowledge.

For example, most of the 33 people who described the panda video stated or considered that:

- The video was shot at a zoo.
- The big panda was a mother and the cub was her baby.
- The big panda was eating bamboo.
- The cub was sleeping.
- The cub sneezed.

As you will find out in the lesson plan that accompanies this unit (“Videogloss”), only one of these five statements is true.

In this case, there is no harm caused. I don’t think the big panda would care too much, for example, if we assume that she is eating bamboo.

But what if you assumed that all Italian people have pizza for dinner, Japanese people eat sushi for lunch, or that British people survive primarily on a diet of fish and chips? You might annoy a few individuals with your generalisations.

The way we label things, either consciously or subconsciously, says a lot about the society in which we live and the experiences we have. Sometimes this can become problematic.

To give you an example, let's go back to 2017 when a Korean woman called Kim Jung-a suddenly realised that her two young children had entered her husband's study. Under normal circumstances, this would not have been a problem. But on that day, at that exact moment, her husband, Professor Robert Kelly, was being interviewed by live video call with the BBC.

The result was a viral video that went global. In the clip, we see a panicking Kim Jung-a slide into the room to retrieve her four-year-old daughter and nine-month-old son, who are happily videobombing their father live on BBC World News. The result is comedy.



Unfortunately, it couldn't have been very funny for Kim Jung-a when the world's media outlets and social media posters assumed that she was the nanny, rather than the mother and wife.

This is an example of how the words we use to label people and things can lead to racial and cultural stereotypes. As teachers, we should be aware of this when setting videotelling tasks.

## Lesson plan

This unit has an accompanying lesson plan in which students put the sneezing baby panda video into their own words and then compare their texts.

The activity makes use of a versatile technique called a "videogloss".

