'The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen.' Ludicrous Invented Sentences in Language Teaching

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This paper assesses, and contests, the long tradition of attacks on the use of invented sentences in language teaching. It seeks to separate arguments against them which rely on parody and ridicule, from more reasoned assertions. Four main serious arguments are identified: invented sentences are ‘meaningless’; they are not discourse; they are not ‘real’; and they are ‘bad’ for learners. Each of these claims is discussed in turn, and countered. It is argued that, while invented sentences have often been uninspiring in practice, there are no valid reasons of principle against their use. On the contrary, sentences invented by a teacher for a specific context may have advantages which are less easily attained by the use of attested examples: as a means of making a lesson more personal and spontaneous; as illustration of a linguistic item; as a means of promoting noticing; and as mnemonics. The conclusion of the argument is that both invented and attested examples have a role to play in language teaching, and that the dogmatic outlawing of the former is misguided.

Central to traditional syllabuses is the use of the invented sentence (henceforward IS). It is used for the presentation of new words and points of grammar, for practice through manipulation and translation, and for testing. Although often considered rather vaguely as ‘old fashioned’, the IS was itself once an innovation in Modern Language Teaching, introduced in the mid-nineteenth century by the originators of the grammar-translation method to replace the texts which had been used in earlier teaching of the Classics (Howatt 1983: 131–2). In ELT, even with the twentieth century decline of translation in favour of the direct method, the IS remained the mainstay of graded structural approaches. Today, it is still used extensively in textbooks for autonomous study, in the teaching of languages other than English, and in materials produced outside what Kachru (1985) has referred to as the ‘inner circle’ of English-speaking countries.1 The IS still constitutes, for example, the majority of exercises in best-selling foreign language courses for home study in the UK.2 Although its use has decreased in internationally marketed ELT materials from major publishers, it still forms the core of examples and exercises in many textbooks for national secondary syllabuses.

Opposition to the IS, however, is also widespread, and almost as long-standing. As early as 1899, Henry Sweet, in his seminal book The Practical
Study of Languages, argued strongly against its use and recounted as evidence the anecdote from which I have taken the title of this article. In his view the result of using the IS:

is to exclude the really natural and idiomatic combinations, which cannot be formed a priori, and to produce insipid, colourless combinations, which do not stamp themselves on the memory, many of which, indeed, could hardly occur in real life, such as ‘The cat of my aunt is more treacherous than the dog of your uncle / We speak about your cousin, and your cousin Amelia is loved by her uncle and aunt / My sons have bought the mirrors of the duke / Horses are taller than tigers.’ At one school where I learnt—or rather made a pretence of learning—Greek on this system, the master used to reconstruct the materials of the exercises given in our book into new and strange combinations, till at last, with a faint smile on his ascetic countenance, he evolved the following sentence which I remembered long after I had forgotten all the rest of my Greek—‘The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen’ (Sweet [1899] 1964: 73).

J. R. Firth, in an address to the Philological Society in 1935, expressed similar antagonism. Like that of Sweet, his argument relies heavily upon parody.

‘I have not seen your father’s pen, but I have read the book of your uncle’s gardener’, like so much in grammar books, is only at the grammatical level. From the semantic point of view it is just nonsense. The following sentence gives perfectly satisfactory contexts for phonetics, morphology, and syntax, but not for semantics: ‘My doctor’s great-grandfather will be singeing the cat’s wings’ (Firth 1957: 24).

Elsewhere he argued (Firth 1968: 175) that the IS is meaningless because it cannot be related to any ‘observable and justifiable set of events in the run of experience’. In the same vein, John Sinclair, in the 1980s, commenting on the IS as used in learners’ dictionaries, remarks that:

teachers and learners have become used to a diet of manufactured, doctored, lop-sided, unnatural, peculiar, and even bizarre examples through which, in the absence of anything better, traditional dictionaries present the language. It is perhaps the main barrier to real fluency (Sinclair 1988: 6).

This illustrious tradition of opposition is constantly echoed in books addressed to teachers today. To give just one example, Michael Lewis, writing in 1993, states that:

Many sentences occurred in textbooks, and were used in grammar practices which were well-formed English sentences, but which it was difficult to imagine anybody actually using. (. . .) While that may be forgivable, it is less so that teachers and textbook writers use such sentences themselves. (. . .) Individual sentences—except those which can readily be identified as sentential lexical items—are meaningless when decontextualised.
Sentences become utterance only when they occur with context (Lewis 1993: 13 and 40)

The use of the IS has now become a sin so grave that it has to be forgiven.

The above quotations illustrate the opposition and ridicule attracted by the IS and the main arguments which are advanced against it. I could cite many more such attacks. They occur regularly in the literature from at least the time of the Reform Movement of the 1890s (Howatt 1983: 185–6). Since the birth of the communicative movement, and the consequent rejection of synthetic syllabuses in favour of analytic ones (as defined by Wilkins 1976), comments dismissing the IS as obviously ineffective, boring and ridiculous have become almost de rigeur—although they are often expressed in rhetorical side-swipes without either much evidence or discussion. The IS is seen as a key and integral element of ‘traditional’ form-focused syllabuses which are considered, as Lewis unequivocally puts it, ‘bad practice’ (Lewis 1993: 167).

Yet to what extent is this blanket dismissal of the IS justified, either by reasoned argument or research? Very often the attacks are supported, as in the citations above, by mockery rather than evidence. The IS is simply, it seems, good for a laugh. In this article my purpose is to subject to scrutiny some aspects of the reasoning behind what has become a virtually automatic antagonism. It would be wrong to suppose, however, that in doing this, I am supporting either the kind of IS, or the way in which it was used in the past. Many instances of the IS in traditional syllabuses are pedagogically bad ones (in a sense which I shall expand below); they have also been overused. For these reasons, it would be foolish, to argue for the use of any IS, nor for a return to courses—of which there were many—based almost entirely upon such sentences. The first task I have set myself in this article is rather to argue that, whatever the shortcomings of the IS in current practice, there is nothing wrong with the use of it in principle. My second, and distinct task, is to consider what the IS might best be like in practice, and for what purposes it might be used. In particular I want to argue—contra Sweet, Firth, and Sinclair—that the more ludicrous and bizarre the meaning of the IS, the better it may be as a mnemonic.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE IS

Antagonism to the IS seems to be based upon an imbroglio of reasons, which need to be separated out, if their merit is to be properly assessed. In disentangling them, we find a combination of uncontroversial but unremarkable facts coupled with dubious assertions and evaluations. The essential arguments against the IS, though repeated in many quarters, are all present in the three authoritative comments (by Sweet, Firth, and Sinclair) with which I began. First, there is the correct assumption that their composition is primarily driven by considerations of form rather than meaning. An IS is composed in order to illustrate a grammatical construction. The following IS, for example,
occurs in a chapter on relative clauses and has clearly been composed to include exactly that construction:

At dinner we shall eat the fish we caught this morning.\textsuperscript{3}

From this point it is taken to follow, however, as Firth argues, that such sentences are nonsense, that they have, as Skehan (1998: 93) has more recently put it, ‘no meanings at all’. Secondly it is pointed out that illustrative ISs of this kind do not relate semantically to the context in which they occur. This is also true. Generally, they are related neither to a situation, nor to a co-text.\textsuperscript{4} They simply emerge as if from nowhere, ‘off the top of the head’ of teachers and textbook writers. They do not seek to communicate any purpose or refer to any extrinsic fact. Their reason for existence is self-reflexive, illustrating a point about themselves. In addition to this lack of connection to situation, they are also usually isolated from each other. Typically, each one begins, numbered, on a new line, as if to stress that it has no semantic or functional link to its fellows. The relative-clause sentence above, for example, is preceded by two unconnected examples.\textsuperscript{5}

1. Excuse me Madam, the young lady whose ring was lost on the beach is at the door.
2. The man to whom you sold the car has left. What, left! and he hasn’t paid me for it yet.

From this absence of situational and co-textual relevance it is sometimes assumed that they cannot therefore ever be processed as discourse—a view which I have expressed myself (Cook 1989: 6–7). A third objection to the IS is that it is not ‘real’ and not typical of how language is used outside the classroom. This is taken to follow from the fact that they are invented, as though ‘invented’ and ‘real’ were mutually exclusive terms. Further to all of these claims, it is argued that they are not helpful to the language learner (‘a barrier to fluency’, as Sinclair puts it), and that learners find them boring (‘insipid and colourless’ in Sweet’s words). Lastly there is the argument that they are ‘unnatural, peculiar, and even bizarre’ used only ‘in the absence of anything better’ (Sinclair 1988). It seems that they are bad because they are peculiar and bizarre.

This is a long catalogue of crimes to be answered. As I intend to deal with these points one by one, it may be helpful to set them out in a table as follows, numbered for ease of reference, in order to distinguish factual claims from more disputable ones. The facts in the first column, I shall assume, are not in dispute. It is to each of the sequiturs, therefore, that I turn in the following discussion. Having countered them, I shall then suggest reasons why the use of the IS might be rehabilitated in grammar teaching.
The qualities of the IS

Fact
1a primarily form driven
2a no context (context or situation)
3a invented
4a sometimes bizarre

Sequitur
1b ‘no meaning’
2b can not be discourse
3b not real
4b bad

The claim that the IS has ‘no meaning’

First let us address the assumption that, because an IS is ‘form-driven’ it has ‘no meaning’. We may say that a stretch of language is ‘form-driven’ when linguistic choices are made to fulfil some criterion which can be stated without reference to meaning. An IS in grammar-translation teaching, for example, is form-driven in the sense that it is constrained by the need to use a particular structure for the purposes of illustration or practice, such as a relative clause in the examples above. Yet in this it is no different from many communicative uses of language which are also form-driven. Verse, for example, is constrained by the need to keep to particular rhythm and rhyme schemes, but this does not preclude it from being driven by considerations of meaning as well. Formal criteria, though they may limit the range of available meanings, in no way destroy this capacity. Consider for example the following opening of a ‘cautionary tale’ in verse by Hilaire Belloc

There was a boy whose name was Jim,
His friends were very good to him.
They gave him tea and cakes and jam,
And slices of delicious ham.

Here we can see that, to an extent, objects come into existence in the fictional world because of the demands of formal patterns. It is largely for reasons of rhyme that the character is called Jim, and eats both ‘delicious ham’ and ‘jam’. These words syllabically all fit the metre too. The fiction thus created seems to incorporate a wild and random element, to be controlled by language itself rather than by reality or the will of the writer. (It is not totally so of course: for though choice is constrained, there are many other words which both rhyme and scan; moreover, at least one word in each pair of rhymes— and not necessarily the first one—can be chosen freely.) There are also some semantic constraints: cakes, jam and ham are all actually food. We understand, however, that this is a story, that as such it has a communicative purpose, and that the events, however peculiar, have meaning within the terms of that story. (The boy is later eaten by a lion as a result of not holding his nurse’s hand:

Now just imagine how it feels,
When first your toes and then your heels,
And then by varying degrees,
Your shins and ankles, calves and knees
Are slowly eaten bit by bit.
No wonder Jim detested it.)

It is presumably largely because they are so attractively peculiar, moreover, that verse stories such as this one are as popular and memorable as they are. The point is that grammatical strings of words, even if partly dictated by some purely formal criterion such as rhythm or rhyme, or the wish to illustrate a relative clause, inevitably take on meaning for the reader, even if that can only be achieved by creating a preposterous imaginary world. It does not matter that they are bizarre, they can still be meaningful. If we were to exclude utterances from being meaningful simply because they do not refer to actual states of affairs, we should have to exclude not only fiction, but also hypotheses and lies.

Indeed we might question whether it is ever possible to create a sentence which is grammatical but meaningless? Perhaps an answer to this question is suggested by the failure of a famous attempt.

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

With this sentence, Chomsky (1957: 15) aimed to illustrate the fact that ‘the notion of “grammatical” cannot be identified with “meaningful” in any semantic sense’ (Chomsky 1957: 15). Such a sentence, one might suppose, would only be of limited specialized interest. Yet it seems to have captured the imagination of students and subsequently the public so completely that it has become famous outside linguistics. It is probably the best-known and most often quoted sentence that Chomsky (or perhaps any linguist) has produced. It is for example his only comment on language cited in dictionaries of quotations, books in which he is also often the only linguist included. The reason perhaps is that it is not actually meaningless. However impossible it may be to interpret as referring to a real world, it can easily, like Belloc’s verse, be interpreted as referring to an imaginary one. It is possible to visualize personified ideas, green but in a rather colourless way, sleeping intensely. (Personally, I imagine the ideas as small hairy creatures with their eyes closed fast, huddled together and snoring furiously on a shelf.) Alternatively, the sentence can be interpreted as referring metaphorically to the actual world: as in a reading in which ‘green’ means ‘environmentalist’, ‘sleep’ means ‘remain in the mind but are no longer voiced’ and ‘furiously’ means ‘causing mental turmoil’. It may even be the dissociation of such texts from the actual world, and their incapacity to refer to anything familiar, which makes them so very memorable, and the images which they inspire so psychologically salient. Chomsky, though intending to act mechanically, placing semantically incompatible words within the clause structure of Noun Phrase + Verb Phrase + Adverbial Adjunct, seems as a by-product, to have produced something pragmatically meaningful and potentially poetic.

In a paper which has considerably influenced this present article,
Widdowson (1990: 78–100) has persuasively argued against this fallacy of supposing that a stretch of language can in Firth’s words ‘provide satisfactory contexts for phonetics, morphology and syntax but not for semantics’. Quoting, among other examples, the same passage from Firth, Widdowson argues that the inevitable possibility of assigning meaning to any grammatical sentence imbues the ISs of both linguistics and language teaching with an immanent literary quality—even if this is seldom exploited. In practice—as we all know—the ISs of structural courses are neither intrinsically interesting, nor were they pursued for their meaning as well as their form. This, however, reflects more upon the ways in which they are used, rather than any intrinsic quality.

Literary discourse, as often remarked by writers on stylistics, is typified by the unusual collocation. A concise example given by Leech (1969) is Dylan Thomas’ phrase ‘a grief ago’, which contrasts with more usual collocations for ‘ago’ such as ‘a week ago’. There is a close link between an unusual collocation and an unusual meaning. Yet when in literature we encounter a semantic impropriety in a grammatical sentence, we do not dismiss it as meaningless, as Firth suggests. When we read the opening of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, for example,

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen
we do not just remark that clocks do not do this, and dismiss it as nonsense, but create a world in which they do. Exactly the same principle applies to Firth’s parody IS: ‘My doctor’s great-grandfather will be singing the cat’s wings’.

Formal constraints (whether phonological, grammatical, or semantic) in other words, do not prevent a sentence from having a meaning. Indeed as Chomsky’s attempt demonstrates to his cost, it seems impossible to stop them having a meaning. Human beings are disposed to interpret a stretch of language as though it had meaning and purpose unless there is clear evidence to the contrary. As Leech (1981: 7) puts it: ‘a speaker of English faced with absurd sentences will strain his interpretative faculty to the utmost to read them meaningfully’. Many observations bear this out. The following verse, for example, was readily interpreted by readers as a meaningful piece of poetry:

All green in the leaves,
I smell dark pools in trees.
Crash. The Moon has fled.

Unknown to them, it had been composed by a computer following a programme which specified possible word combinations with no reference to meaning (Boden 1992: 158).

Literary examples, and the way people read them, show that formal constraints and departures from the norm, far from working against meaning, produce some of the most imaginative and interesting meanings. The same principles can apply to an IS composed to illustrate a grammatical structure in
language teaching. Such sentences may not often be, as literature is, uplifting and interesting, but they are certainly not without meaning.

This inseparability of form and meaning and the inevitable way in which one entails the other (itself ironically a doctrine of Firthian linguistics) incidentally throws grave doubt on the whole debate about the balance between meaning and form in language teaching, and calls into question the pretensions of some SLA research to resolve the question of the optimum balance between form-focused or meaning-focused materials or activities in language teaching (Long and Robinson 1998; N. Ellis and Laporte 1997). For as any instance of language (whether attested or invented) inevitably has both form and meaning, it is impossible to say, simply from the nature of the material or activity, which of the two is attracting a student’s attention. Even a piece of language carrying important and interesting information can be perceived primarily as an instance of a structure, while even the most tedious and contrived IS can be processed in terms of meaning only. Although there is, in the literature, both awareness and discussion of the inevitable inseparability of form and meaning (George 1972; Bygate 1994), and the conundrum which this poses for any attempt to focus upon one to the exclusion of the other, in practical pedagogic suggestions many researchers fall into the trap of assuming that focus on meaning or form are qualities of language production and of text, rather than of reception. Yet whatever the intentions of materials producers or syllabus designers may be to focus attention on meaning or form, they cannot state with any reliability that any particular learner (let alone students of all ages, types, and educational backgrounds, etc.) will perceive what they have produced in the way it was intended.

The claim that an IS is not discourse

Let us now turn to the second assumed sequitur (2b): that an IS, having neither context of situation nor of co-text, cannot be processed as discourse. It remains in other words a sentence; it cannot be perceived as an utterance. The point is hinted at by Firth when he writes of an IS not having a ‘satisfactory context’, and it is made much of by Sweet at a later point in *The Practical Study of Languages* (1899: 99–102) when he writes that ‘the main foundation of the practical study of languages should be connected texts’.10 As we have seen in the quotation from Lewis (1993), the view is still glibly repeated today as received wisdom.

Here again we need to separate carefully a factual premise from a supposed sequitur. That the IS often occurs as a single isolated sentence is beyond doubt; but there are at least three reasons why this does not in itself disqualify it from being discourse.

First, it is perfectly possible for a complete interaction to consist of a single utterance which can also be considered as a grammatical sentence. This is often the case, for example, with notes or notices.
Get in lane.

is a familiar example for British road users.

Dr Hooper is away today

is an example I recently saw pinned on the door of an office in a British University.

Your programme has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down

appears occasionally, for reasons unknown to me, on my computer screen. Cryptic, peremptory, unhelpful and uncommunicative perhaps, but undoubtedly these are stretches of language which can be considered both as discourse and as grammatical sentences. (I am defining the term discourse here as ‘a stretch of language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive’ (Cook 1989: 156)).

Secondly, when we read a text consisting of many sentences we inevitably process the meaning of the opening sentence without the benefit of its sequels. Although the meaning of a first sentence in a text may be altered in the light of subsequent co-text, it is still meaningful and purposive at the moment of first reading, even though its contribution to a unified whole will demand further reading. One does not have to process the entire discourse in order to understand a part of it, but can break off at any point, putting interpretations of the meanings and purposes encountered so far ‘on hold’. If such interruption were not feasible, we should be in the impossible situation of having to read every text—including very long ones—straight through without stopping. It follows that, as the break can take place after reading the first sentence of a text, we must be able to process a single sentence as discourse.

This is not to say that the processing of the opening sentence in a non-pedagogic text is exactly analogous to that of an isolated IS in a traditional textbook. The former will be influenced by expectations determined by knowledge of the genre in which it occurs (the opening sentence of a novel is expected to initiate a fictional narrative and so on) and these are very different from those aroused by a textbook which is known to present sentences in isolation for exemplification or practice. Nevertheless, the fact that opening sentences do make sense reinforces the point that neither situation nor co-text are as necessary to processing as sometimes implied. The IS in traditional grammar courses is not often followed up, but that is not to say that it could not be. It is a fragment of discourse with a potential to be taken further. This may on occasion make it more interesting than a whole text; it is like a fragment of a newspaper report glimpsed over the shoulder of another passenger on a rush hour train. This tantalizing potential of a brief unexpanded statement to arouse interest and stimulate thought simply because it says so little, seems to be recognized in the very brief verse forms
which are found in many cultures, such as the Japanese Senryu which (at least in translation) emerges as a single sentence:

The prostitute, too,
When the game is slow,
Changes her name.\textsuperscript{11}

(The more famous \textit{haiku} form exploits the same principle, but tends not to be a grammatical sentence as it lacks a main verb.)

The absence of co-text, then, is not necessarily an obstacle to the processing of an IS as discourse. Yet what about the facts that its meaning often (though not necessarily) bears no relation to the situation in which it occurs, and is not aided by genre-determined expectations? An IS such as ‘\textit{At dinner we shall eat the fish we caught this morning}’ is likely to be used between people who have not been fishing, who are not going to be having dinner together, who are not even near water.

This brings us to the third reason that an IS can be processed as discourse, and explains why students and teachers are unlikely to be troubled by the absence of situational reference. This is that it is really quite usual for an utterance to make no reference to its immediate context. In this circumstance, the use of contextual referents such as deictics, definite articles and unknown names, far from being interpreted as somehow crazily meaningless, immediately create their own context. There is no more reason for a student given this sentence to point out that we did not in fact catch a fish this morning, than for me to object that John Lennon did not actually come to my house when I hear him sing the abrupt and dramatic opening of the song ‘\textit{No Reply}’:

\begin{verbatim}
This happened once before,
When I came to your door,
No reply.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{verbatim}

In studies of narrative literature, this dramatic device of beginning a story with a definite reference as though we were already in, and familiar with, the situation, has often been noted:\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{verbatim}
Dombey sat in the corner of the darkened room in the great armchair by the bedside . . .\textsuperscript{14}
\end{verbatim}

Utterances which suddenly transport us to another context are far from unusual, nor are they limited to fiction as opposed to fact, or to high-flown fantasy rather than mundane business. The opening of a radio or TV news item has the same effect:

\begin{verbatim}
Diana, Princess of Wales, has been killed in a car accident in Paris.
\end{verbatim}

The property of many sentences is not to reflect the immediate situation but to create without warning an alternative one (whether actual or fictional) in the minds of their receivers. Indeed there are many genres, of great social
significance (such as prayers, films, books, television programmes, lectures and lessons) which specialize, as it were, in ignoring the situation of their reception, and pulling us away to another (Cook 2000: 35–8). Although reception of these genres must always take place in some actual physical location, the places in which we experience them—places of worship, cinemas, libraries, sitting rooms, classrooms—are often designed or arranged to be conducive to the mind’s escaping through language from these physical limitations.

Certainly, a considerable change of mind set (perhaps through the intervention of an imaginative and resourceful teacher) would be needed for the sentences in textbooks to be perceived in ways similar to more imaginative genres, and in practice it may be that the genre of the textbook is too ‘dead’ to allow such a realignment to take place. Yet this characteristic, as argued above, is not a consequence of examples being invented. It can apply as much to ‘real’ as to ‘invented’ examples, and though it may be an inevitable feature of examples provided by any textbook, it is not necessarily so for those provided by the teacher (a point to be discussed further in the section entitled ‘Using invented sentences in teaching’).

The claim that the IS is not real

Let us turn now to the third supposed sequitur, that because an IS is invented, it is not ‘real’. This is meant in the sense that it is not an attested example (henceforth AE) of use in actual communication. In the era of readily available computer-readable corpora, this has probably become the most standard objection to the IS. Appropriately, it is put forward in my opening quotations by the pioneer of computerized corpus linguistics, John Sinclair, who implies that the AE is ‘better’ for ‘fluency’ than ‘a diet of manufactured . . . examples’.

The dichotomy between ‘invented’ and ‘attested’, however, is by no means straightforward. In one sense, the terms are not mutually exclusive. The utterances in attested data have also been invented, though for communication rather than illustration. The difference is one of purpose. Yet even if we accept this opposition of IS and AE as unproblematic, it is important not to conflate it with a number of different but related oppositions whose terms can vary independently. There is not, for example, any necessary connection, as Sinclair suggests, between invention and peculiarness. An AE can be just as ‘bizarre’ and ‘unypical’ as any IS:

Dahlia’s voice was discovered the previous night at the karaoke session (cited in Hoey 1998)

for example is an instance of a weird AE. Conversely, an IS can be unremarkable.

I have just cleaned my room (Shuppan 1986: 17)
is an IS from a structural English Language course illustrating the position of
adverbs between auxiliary and main verb. Neither the IS nor the AE therefore
has a monopoly on either bizarreness or mundanity. If, for pedagogic reasons,
we seek either ‘ordinariness’ or ‘extraordinariness’, we can find examples in
both AEs and ISs.

Nor does the fact that something is ‘attested’ imply that it is typical. (The
examples in traditional dictionaries were frequently attested but, in the view
of many, often untypical.) To establish typicality, comparison of a large
number of attested examples is needed (Stubbs 1995). Nor is there any
necessary connection between either the IS or the AE and originality. Some
AEs are identical to others, and thus not original; many (if not most) contain
ready-made units and lexical phrases which are copied rather than created.
These facts are also in principle, however, true of the IS. Speakers may not
have conscious access to the kind of patterns and uses revealed by a corpus.
Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose that people who can produce
typical examples of the language when using it in actual communication,
cannot also do so when they concoct an IS in order to illustrate a point.
Indeed, if certain collocations, colligations and semantic prosodies are—as
some researchers suggest (Pawley and Syder 1983; Hoey 1998; Stubbs
1995)—heavily weighted in language processing, they are just as likely
(perhaps even more likely) to surface in invention for illustration as in actual
use for communication.

It is true that, in traditional language courses, the IS often has a stilted and
unnatural feel to it. Yet this may well derive from factors other than the
inability of the inventor to produce typical instances. The inventor of an IS
may have other criteria than realism. The intention may even be to skew or
simplify the language deliberately for some pedagogic reason: to make the
example more memorable, more useful, or more accessible. We should
remember too that the heyday of the IS was at a time when formal, literary,
written, and prestigious uses were considered to be the most appropriate
model for students. Consequently their creators were not attempting to
emulate or teach the language of colloquial spoken interaction as the
examples used in many contemporary communicative courses do. In these
circumstances, it seems wrong to criticize the writers of the IS for not fulfilling
aims which they did not espouse. What needs to be considered is the validity
of the aims themselves. The parodic examples given by Sweet and Firth
illustrate this point about misunderstanding the compositional criteria rather
well, in their use of a construction with ‘of’: the dog of your uncle, the mirrors of
the duke, the lower jaw of the hen, the book of your uncle’s gardener. If assessed as
models for the use of English, these are not good examples. As both intuition
and corpora will testify, a premodifying possessive construction (your uncle’s,
etc.) is more typical and more native-like in these linguistic contexts than a
postmodifying possessive construction (of your uncle, etc.). Yet as sentences for
translation into a language in which a post-modifying construction is more
frequent—as in French, Spanish and many other languages—this distortion of
usual English acts as a guide to the student. In fact, both Firth and Sweet are
guilty of playing the same trick. They deliberately create instances of the IS in
which English grammar is distorted. They also use—explicitly in Sweet’s case,
implicitly in Firth’s—sentences which are not being used for teaching English,
but for teaching another language. There is also a supreme irony in Firth’s
argument: his case against invented examples is made by inventing an
example of an invented example!

As many critical commentators on the notion of authenticity have argued,
the difference between attested and invented instances of language is
circumstantial rather than linguistic (Widdowson 1978: 80, 1994, 1998; Van
Lier 1996: 123–8). The quality of authenticity is not automatically carried over
when the attested instance of language use is taken away from its original
context. Something which was authentic when used, is no longer authentic
when repeated for pedagogic purposes. ‘Reality’, as Widdowson (1998) puts it,
‘does not travel with the text’. Conversely an IS can easily become authentic if
it is used for some non-pedagogic purpose—say for the beginning of a story.
The lack of a clear distinction on any linguistic grounds is borne out by the
fact that attested and invented sentences are simply indistinguishable. Thus
given the following six example sentences, each illustrating the imperative, it
is quite impossible for you to tell me which are invented (if any) and which
are attested (if any).

Let that one downstairs laugh.
Stay around for the surprise ending.
Call an ambulance using an assistant if necessary.
Buy some milk when you go.
Bring a smile to the face of someone in need.
By all means let her send the modem back.

I know the answer to this myself, but the reason is a trivial one: I know which
ones I made up and which ones I found or heard.15

As already mentioned, many AEs from corpora strike the reader as bizarre—
sometimes even more bizarre than the wildest of inventions. This is one of the
reasons that they are carefully selected before they are used in teaching
materials. Such selection is not only carried out for the valid pedagogic and
linguistic reasons such as the exclusion of ungrammatical, excessively
complicated, unhelpful or misleading instances. It is also driven by the
desire of international publishers to appear up-to-date and attractive, and
avoid giving offence in a wide variety of cultural contexts. Example sentences
used in ELT, whether attested or invented, tend to avoid the controversial,
obscene, taboo, archaic, low-status or politically incorrect. This is perhaps why
the dialogues in many textbooks based on ‘real’ language are generally so
unremittingly bland. The combined forces of pedagogic common sense and
commercially inspired priggishness ensure a degree of censorship which is
tantamount to a misrepresentation of the facts of actual language use, and
whose artificiality is not far removed from calculated invention. In these
circumstances it seems reasonable to opt for the IS for reasons of convenience. For the teacher and textbook writer, it is generally quicker and easier to use an IS than an AE.

The juxtaposition of the invented and the ‘real’ (a word often used as a synonym for attested) falls foul of the paradox that it is authentic to be artificial, because much actual human behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, is not concerned with reality at all. It is rather dedicated to deception, artifice, make-believe, replication, hypothesis and fiction (Cook 2000). Indeed it is this ability to produce alternative realities which is arguably the distinctive characteristic of our species, and there has been recent speculation that the need for prevarication and deceit may have developed in tandem with, or even have stimulated, the evolution of language (Ridley 1994; Dunbar 1996). Whatever the truth of such larger claims, a large part of human behaviour, both at work and at play, is devoted to invention or simulation of one kind or another, and language often plays the major role in these activities (Goffman 1974: 40–82). In this context the use of invented examples in language teaching to illustrate not how things actually happen, but the principles which guide how they might happen, is far from being as untypical of human activity in general as the critics seem to assume.

USING INVENTED SENTENCES IN TEACHING

The discussion so far has countered at length three of the reasons which are usually given for the rejection of ISs in language teaching—that they have no meaning, are not discourse, and are not ‘real’. The purpose of this, however, is not to argue that all examples should be invented, in the way that many now argue that all examples should be attested. My point is rather that teachers and materials writers should be able to move freely between the two kinds of data as the occasion demands. Nor is my intention to advocate a return to the excessive use of ISs which were made in the traditional syllabus, where textbooks and consequently lessons which were based upon nothing but invented sentences, just as now there are many textbooks and lessons which use nothing but attested examples. The view expressed here is rather that both of these excesses is impoverishing and likely to become tedious, depriving materials writers, teachers and students of the full resources of the language. There are two sources of language data: invention and observation. Nothing is to be gained by dogmatically outlawing either on theoretical grounds, especially when, as I hope to have shown above, the theoretical reasoning is weak. At present, convincing pedagogic arguments in favour of attested examples have been well expressed and are well known (Carter 1998; McCarthy 1998). My purpose here is not to dismiss the use of attested examples, but to argue that they are well complemented by invented sentences, which have their place and function in the language classroom too.

What then are some of the uses to which invented sentences may be put in the classroom? I should like to suggest at least four: as a means of making the
lesson more personal and spontaneous; as illustration; as a means of 
promoting noticing; and as a mnemonic device.

In discussing these functions, a distinction should be made (as already 
suggested) between those ISs provided ready-made by textbooks and those 
provided by teachers. As I hope to have shown above, where example 
sentences are provided from outside sources there is little to choose between 
IS and AE. In what follows, I deal with the optimum case of sentences 
invented by the teacher him- or herself. It is not always the case, of course, 
that a teacher of a language necessarily has the competence to invent accurate 
and useful examples. There are also times when invention fails even the most 
inspired teacher. In these cases examples, whether invented or attested, must 
be sought elsewhere.

The IS as customized and spontaneous data

The first function—that of making the lesson more personal—applies only to 
the category of examples provided by teachers. An IS thought up by the 
teacher for his or her students has the inbuilt benefit of being something 
specifically made for them, belonging to that particular classroom—with 
consequent positive effects. While examples provided by textbooks can often 
seem very distant, those provided by the teacher who knows the students can 
be sensitively adjusted to their existing state of knowledge, needs, and 
preferences. In many ways it can be conceived as more ‘real’ and more 
contextualized—because it is the product of immediate interaction between 
those present—than an attested example brought in from somewhere else. 
Textbooks are needed, but they also bring risks of irrelevance, whether based 
on ‘reality’ or invention. Arguably, it was often the distance of the ready-
made ISs in structural textbooks, rather than the fact that they were invented, 
which lent them the air of tedium, unreality, and irrelevance so often mocked 
by their critics. Yet the same effect can just as easily arise when attested 
language is used in textbooks. For a piece of ‘real’ language reproduced in a 
textbook is in fact a piece of someone else’s reality, divorced from its original 
context, and packaged for delivery. It can be just as bleak and distant as the 
dullest IS in a grammar translation course. It comes with no guarantee of 
interest of relevance.

The IS as illustration

A second appropriate use of the IS is as an illustration of lexis and grammar. 
Being an instantiation of words and grammar rather than a statement of a 
lexical item or a grammatical rule, it avoids the pitfalls inherent in dealing 
with lexis and grammar separately. If activities throw up a structure with 
which students are familiar and to which the teacher wishes to draw their 
attention, he or she necessarily has two options to demonstrate this new 
structure in action: to make up an example or to retrieve one from elsewhere.
As I have argued above, there may be little difference in practice between an attested and an invented example sentence—so much so that it is impossible to tell the two apart without the benefit of extra information. (Students of course have such extra information, in that they can see that the sentence is being invented for them.) Yet the disadvantages of always having to find an attested example from the teacher’s point of view is that each one has to be searched for. Its use has to be planned in advance, and thus ties the teacher to a static and preordained lesson plan, allowing less room for manoeuvre and flexibility. This would be true even in a classroom with instant access to extensive computer readable corpora. The advantage of the illustrative sentence invented by the teacher on the spur of the moment is that (in the hands of a good teacher) it can be produced quickly and in quantity, and tailored to individual classes to be made entertaining, and to refer to matters of interest and importance to them.

The IS as a means of promoting noticing

A third function of the invented example is to promote ‘noticing’ in the sense of paying conscious attention to ‘input’ (Schmidt 1990). Here again, as in the function of illustration, those very characteristics for which the IS is castigated may prove a positive advantage. Precisely because it is isolated and decontextualized it can stand in relief against the activity from which it arises, lifting out from it the structure in question, and presenting it unencumbered by the distractions and complications which can sometimes work against noticing in on-line communication. If it is custom-made by the teacher it can be designed in ways which will make the structure salient for particular students by situating it in a linguistic environment which the teacher knows will make it salient for them. Yet again, there should be no dogma here. As with illustration, there is nothing necessarily or inherently good or bad about a sentence because it is either attested of invented. Each sentence from either source must be judged on its pedagogic merits. The issue remains of how best to promote the learning of the structure or item after it has been noticed—but this is true of both ISs and AEs.

The IS as mnemonic

Lastly and perhaps supremely the IS can provide a mnemonic for students. The more bizarre its meaning the more likely it is to be remembered. Ironically, Sweet himself provides evidence of this. There is, in his anecdote cited at the beginning of this paper, a glaring contradiction. First he criticizes the IS for being ‘colourless combinations, which do not stamp themselves on the memory’. Then, only a few lines later, he gives as an example a ‘sentence which I remembered long after I had forgotten all the rest of my Greek’ (emphasis added). The IS it seems is both utterly forgettable but completely memorable.
The point overlooked by Sweet is that there are two opposite types of IS, the bland and the bizarre. Although AEs are also similarly divided, the coupling of the move towards attestedness with censorship of the controversial, has pulled language teaching in the direction of unremarkable, and therefore unmemorable examples. It may, however, be the startlingly extraordinary which is pedagogically more useful. Whatever other Greek Sweet may have ‘made a pretence of learning’, he certainly learned the Greek (which he quotes from memory) in this outlandish sentence very well. My own experience of this sentence also testifies to its memorable quality. I had no problem remembering it, although I made no note of it at the time.

This is hardly surprising. There is a great deal in both personal experience, and psycholinguistic research which suggests that it is the unusual instance which is more likely to be recalled verbatim. Commenting critically on the accepted belief in linguistics that it is content rather than form which is remembered, Ellis and Beattie (1986: 244–51) document how this finding is based almost entirely upon laboratory research in the 1960s in the behaviourist tradition in which subjects were given bland sentences of no interest, with slight and confusing variations. Other research into the recall of actual discourse shows that people do successfully recall the exact wording of certain original or emotive utterances (Keenan et al. 1977; Bates et al. 1980). The instances of language use which people most readily memorize verbatim are not from the mundane communications of everyday life, where exact wording is unimportant, but those marked by unusual, elevated, or archaic language, those reinforced by parallel structures such as rhythm and rhyme, and those with important or emotional content. The most likely stretches of language to be recalled verbatim are from genres such as prayers, jokes, literature, songs, graffiti, tabloid headlines, and rhetorical speeches. The sentence The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen, precisely by being so absurd, seems to have gained entry to this elite category. It is remembered exactly—and can therefore serve as a reliable model for composition for other sentences in Greek.

It seems, then, that for a sentence to function as a mnemonic it must have one or more of the following characteristics. It should be semantically bizarre like Chomsky’s colorless green ideas or Sweet’s actual example (the philosopher pulled the lower jaw . . .), though without distorting the grammar in the way that Firth’s and Sweet’s invented examples do.16 It should be about emotionally significant or interesting topics. It should contain a formal mnemonic device (either within itself or in its relation to other sentences) such as alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, or grammatical parallelism. Here, as always, there is no monopoly held either by invented or attested examples. Indeed, as already argued above, the line between them is difficult to establish. (If Belloc had been a language teacher and written his verses, cited above, about Jim, who ran away from his nurse and was eaten by a lion, for his students then the very same text would have been invented not attested!) Actual discourse abounds with examples of all three of these qualities—
especially in many genres which are widely disseminated, highly valued, and
often repeated (Cook 2000: 61–93). Corpora can certainly provide examples of
sentences which have any or all of these qualities. In practice, however,
contemporary language courses based on real language, constrained by
publishers’ anxieties and preconceptions, tend to focus upon bland,
offensive and rather forgettable instances of communication.

What is needed to fulfil this function is a stock of memorable sentences—
either invented or collected—to which students can refer mentally when
needed as a model. Although this does not automatically make them active
knowledge available for use, it is at least a first step along the way. One
excellent source of such language is undoubtedly the genres to which I have
referred above (though avoiding deviant uses of grammar) a diet of
memorized songs, poems, children’s stories, jokes, etc. But the IS, custom-
made by the teacher, may at times also have an added advantage. For
bizarreness and relevance are not absolute qualities. They cannot be inallibly
factory-produced by the textbook writer. It is the teacher who is best
positioned to decide what is bizarre or important or interesting (and thus
memorable) for his or her students, and to make delicate choices about the
extent to which controversial topics (sex, religion, conflict, death, etc.) are
acceptable in her classroom. The teacher is the best judge—whether as
inventor or selector—of what students will remember. After all it was for his
own students that Sweet’s resourceful Greek master invented his supremely
memorable sentence. He knew, it seems, what would stick in the memory of
the young Sweet—and it worked!

THE CLAIM THAT THE IS IS BORING

Let us conclude by examining a final assumption about the IS: that it is
necessarily boring and bad, and that consequently students prefer the AE. This
claim collapses two distinctions (invented versus attested, and banal versus
interesting) which can in fact, as argued above, vary independently. Moreover, if the IS and the AE are, as also argued above, indistinguishable,
this question is perhaps a non-starter. Yet it is part of a larger and more
important question about which students like which approaches to language,
and in particular whether the general movement away from artifice and focus
on form at one extreme, towards ‘real life’ and focus on communication at the
other, is actually as popular as it is generally assumed to be. The answer at the
present time is probably that we simply do not know, for amid all the
multifarious research on different approaches to language teaching, there is
startlingly little research on which ones are actually liked by students. Some
recent work on the other hand documents the motivating effect of play with
tage form in a wide variety of contexts (Lantolf 1997; Kramsch and
Sullivan 1996; Lo et al. 1998; Ohta 1998; Rampton 1999; Tarone 2000; Cook
1997, 2000; McNally 2000; Sullivan 2000; Tarone and Broner 2001); but
there is clearly a great deal more research to be done. If it is done, we may risk
seeing some cherished myths about student preferences for a constant focus on meaning and reality destroyed.

Perhaps, at the root of the opposition to the IS is simply a puritanical opposition to them *because* they are sometimes ‘unnatural, peculiar, and even bizarre’. Yet there seems to be a confusion here or at least an equivocation about whether these are qualities of the language or of the meaning. Of course it is not good practice to give students examples which are ‘peculiar’ in the sense that they do not exemplify an acceptable use of the grammar. Bizarreness of meaning however, far from interfering with the acquisition of correct structures may even facilitate it. A peculiar sentence either attested or invented would seem to have pedagogic advantages—provided that it is a good model of grammar. To suppose that an IS will alienate or mislead students because it has an odd meaning or is artificially tailored to illustrate a structure is simply an assertion without evidence, which ignores the human predilection for the artificial, the nature of actual language use, and resourcefulness in interpretation. Let me conclude with a quotation—albeit from an unusually gifted student—recalling early experiences of language learning. It shows how even the formally constrained and artificial IS, takes on meanings which, precisely because they are peculiar and bizarre, both instruct and remain in the memory, while simultaneously leading the student towards a more authentic use of the lexis and grammar which they illustrate.

I learned to read English before I could read Russian. My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar—Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts—‘Who is Ben?’ ‘He is Dan’, ‘Sam is in bed’, and so on. Although it all remained rather stiff and patchy (the compiler was handicapped by having to employ—for the initial lessons, at least—words of not more than three letters), my imagination somehow managed to obtain the necessary data. Wafaced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud in their possession of certain tools (‘Ben has an axe’), they now drift with a slow-motioned slouch across the remotest backdrop of memory; and akin to the mad alphabet of an optician’s chart, the grammar book lettering looms before me. ( . . .) on later pages longer words appeared; and at the very end of the brown ink-stained volume, a real, sensible story unfolded its adult sentences. (‘One day Ted said to Ann: Let us . . .’), the little reader’s ultimate triumph and reward. I was thrilled by the thought that some day I might attain such proficiency. The magic has endured, and whenever a grammar book comes my way, I instantly turn to the last page to enjoy a forbidden glimpse of the laborious student’s future, of that promised land where, at last, words are meant to mean what they mean (Vladimir Nabokov in *Speak Memory*, quoted in Brumfit 1991).

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NOTES

1 Kachru (1985) divides the English-using world into three concentric circles. ‘The Inner Circle’ consists of the native English-speaking countries. ‘The Outer Circle’ comprises the former colonies or spheres of influence of the UK and USA where English has either achieved the status of an official language or is widely used in education and administration. ‘The Expanding Circle’ is composed of countries where English is fast becoming a dominant second language.

2 In the UK, for example, the IS is central to exercises in three best-selling language courses Teach Yourself, Made Simple and Penguin.

3 From Speight (1962).

4 The sentences used in situational language teaching (What are you doing? You are sitting at your desk. etc.) relate superficially to the situation but have no communicative purpose.

5 Potentially there is a connection between the visit to the beach and the catching of the fish, but this is not pursued. The second of these is unusual in its attempt to create a miniature dialogue.

6 In later writing Chomsky (1965: 11) uses the term ‘acceptable’ rather than ‘meaningful’ in contrast to grammatical to describe such cases. The arguments advanced here that the sentence is meaningful might be dismissed on the grounds that they illustrate pragmatic meaning rather than the semantic meaning to which Chomsky carefully refers. The pragmatic meanings discussed here, however, all draw and depend upon the semantics.

7 The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (1996) for example gives three quotations from Chomsky. One is about politics; one about intellectual enquiry in general; the ‘green ideas’ sentence is the only one about language. The same three quotations appear in several other popular dictionaries.

8 In fact the phrase ‘green thought’ (not very different from ‘green ideas’) does occur in a poem by Andrew Marvell, and ‘ideas’ are said to ‘sleep’ in Alexander Pope’s Dunciad (Harland 1993: 21).

9 Given the usual opposition between Firthian and Chomskyan linguistics, it is ironic how close Chomsky’s formulation (“grammatical” cannot be identified with “meaningful” in any semantic sense) is to Firth’s earlier words. Firth’s remarks from 1935 were published in 1957, the same year as Syntactic Structures.

10 Sweet’s reasons for advocating the use of connected text derived not from any theory of discourse, but from his belief in the Associationist view of learning which was popular at the time (Sweet 1964: 99–108).


12 For further comment on the use of dramatic deictic openings in Beatles songs, see Cook and Mercer 2000.

13 For further discussion of this point see Cook 1994: 12–14.

14 The opening of Dombey and Son by Charles Dickens.

15 The first three are attested; the last three invented. The first sentence, which has the feel of an awkward IS, is from the novel Burning Bright by Helen Dunmore, p. 143; the second from the Sunday Times Culture Section 20 September 1998, p. 45; the third from an emergency procedures leaflet.

16 Sweet’s sentence is a translation of an invented sentence in Ancient Greek. His distortion of the usual English is not reflected in the Greek.
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