

COERCION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CHICK LIT: FUNCTIONAL ASPECT

The present study addresses the functional potential of coercion in English language chick lit.

Coercion has been widely discussed in Linguistics (H. De Swart, P. Lauwers, P. Willems, L.A. Michaelis, J. Pustejovsky, E. Jesek, G. Booij, J. Audrig, and others). The phenomenon has been identified as a repair strategy, which transforms semantic features of an expression that go against the semantic-pragmatic rules regulating the composition of the elements within a given sentence [1]. For example, in (1) *You have apple on your shirt* [10, p. 269], the grammatical context causes the interpretation of *apple* as ‘an unidentified amount of apple’. In other words, the resolution goes by way of coercing the meaning of a mass noun into a countable noun.

To date, coercion has been viewed as a semantic, pragmatic and constructional phenomenon.

The semantic nature of coercion is discussed in terms of cooperation between lexical and phrasal meaning [11]. In case these two mismatch, the compromise should be found between the incongruous semantic properties and an invisible syntactic operator, which would trigger the process.

(2) a) *His mother always used to pick him up from school* [8].

b) *He’s one of my old friends from school* [8].

In cases like (2), the context *selects* the appropriate meaning from within the semantic range of the word *school* – ‘place’ for (2a), and ‘time’ for (2b).

The pragmatic explanation represents coercion as a mediation between a function and an incompatible argument [3].

(3) *I’ll just finish my coffee* [8].

In cases like (3), *finish*, which selects for an activity, conflicts with *coffee*, which is a noun denoting an entity. Repair is realized by *enriching* the compositional utterance meaning with the help of semantic operator lacking overt form [1]. In (3), the final interpretation is enriched with the drinking event that augments the semantic composition.

The latter kind of approach takes a constructional view of coercion captured in terms of *override*, or an actual change of properties [1; 9]. This view of the term coercion has been put to in Construction Grammar, where constructions are mental representations of concrete cases of language use, conventionalized mappings between a form and meaning / function of complex syntactic units [5].

(4) *You are not chickening out, are you?* [8].

Fragment (4) contains a conventional pattern (construction) *V out* meaning ‘go into an unusual mental state’ [6]. In it, *chicken out* refers to a state induced by an activity and is labelled by a noun (*chicken*), not a verb and thus lacks the activity meaning. It means the effect is coercive [1]. Moreover, the meaning of *chicken out* is idiomatic (‘to decide at the last moment not to do something you said you would do, because you are afraid’) and independent

from *chicken* ('a common farm bird that is kept for its meat and eggs'). Here, the constructional semantics is overriding the meaning of single words [1].

As we can see, coercion is a diverse, pervasive phenomenon and involves three types: *coercion by selection*, which consists of contextual adjustments, *coercion by enrichment*, which involves augmentation of lexical semantics in context, and *coercion by override*, which modifies, replaces or removes properties of the coerced item often requiring its idiomatic interpretation. The first two type coercions are regarded soft cases while the third one is thought of as radical coercion as it requires a lot more force exerted by the context [1].

Type coercions are applicable to different kinds of effects. For instance, coercion by selection may come in handy at explaining anomalous conversions while coercion by enrichment will suggest a compromise construal for deciphering aspectual mismatches. Some cases require leaving type coercion and staying with constructional coercion. Constructions are particularly fruitful environment to look for coercion data [1], as any «construction that selects for a specific lexical class or phrasal daughter is a potential coercion trigger» [9, pp. 1383–1384].

Within the discourse of English language chick lit, coercion may perform a number of important stylistic, cognitive and pragmatic functions. Since the genre is characterized by linguistic playfulness, informality, emotional immediacy, and a tendency toward linguistic innovation [2], coercive mechanisms become an effective means of producing expressive and contextually rich meanings. In particular, coercion enables authors to manipulate conventional semantic, pragmatic, and constructional expectations in ways that reflect the instability, emotional intensity, and performative nature of contemporary female identity often represented in chick lit narratives.

One of the primary functions of coercion in English language chick lit is the creation of humour and irony. Coercive reinterpretation frequently produces unexpected semantic shifts that generate comic effects through incongruity. One example of this is (5):

(5) – ‘Ah, yes. And you are an actress too? Perhaps we can find a role for you?’ He had a thickly accented voice with heavily rolled rs.

– ‘No, thanks. ***I can’t act my way out of a paper bag.***’

- ‘That’s funny,’ said Kimberley. Why did Americans say ‘That’s funny’? They said it instead of laughing, as if funniness were something you participated in [4, p. 42].

The conversation in (5) occurs in a highly performative social environment connected with celebrity culture, fashion, and the entertainment industry. Olivia Joules, the protagonist in [4] is a journalist, who arrives at a glamorous beauty event populated by aspiring actresses, models, PR representatives, and media personalities. The atmosphere is artificial, image-oriented, and dominated by superficial social rituals. Olivia immediately perceives the women around her as strikingly uniform – they share similar appearances, behaviour, ambitions, and conversational patterns. Their carefully constructed femininity, polished bodies, and standardized speech create an impression of interchangeability and intellectual emptiness, which Olivia observes with irony and skepticism.

The dialogue illustrates coercion by enrichment. The humour and stylistic effect of the fragment emerge not only from what is explicitly stated, but also from the contextual meanings readers are expected to infer. Olivia’s response, “*I can’t act my way out of a paper bag,*” relies on a construction whose interpretation requires pragmatic enrichment. Literally, the phrase describes an impossible physical action; however, within the conversational context it is coerced into the meaning ‘I am completely incapable of acting.’ The expression functions as a

self-deprecating humorous remark and simultaneously distances Olivia from the aspiring actresses surrounding her. The coercive interpretation depends on the reader's ability to activate the conventional figurative scenario encoded in the construction.

The next excerpt exemplifies an important characterizing function in English language chick lit. In it, Connie, the protagonist of [12], is a plus-size woman who is describing how she met her boyfriend, Bruce:

(6) *I had met Bruce Guberman at a party, in what felt like a scene from somebody else's life. I'd never met a guy at a social gathering who'd been so taken with me that he actually asked me for a date on the spot. My typical m.o. is to wear down their resistance with my wit, my charm, and usually a home-cooked dinner starring kosher chicken with garlic and rosemary. Bruce did not require a chicken. **Bruce was easy** [12].*

Connie's narration reveals deep internalized insecurity about her body and desirability. She assumes that men naturally resist her and must be gradually persuaded to appreciate her personality. Her self-description is heavily ironic and self-aware, which is typical of chick lit protagonists. The sentence *Bruce was easy* is a case of coercion by enrichment. The adjective *easy* normally selects for activities, tasks, situations, or objects that require little effort (*easy exam, easy task, easy journey*). When applied to a person, especially in isolation, it creates semantic underspecification or mild incongruity because the expected parameter of "ease" is absent. The reader therefore has to enrich the meaning contextually by reconstructing the omitted scenario: *easy to attract / easy to persuade / easy to date / easy to win over romantically*. These semantic components are not overtly expressed in the sentence itself but are supplied through the preceding context describing Connie's usual strategies for attracting men. The sentence "*Bruce was easy*" therefore reflects not only Bruce's behaviour, but also Conny's astonishment at being desired without needing to "earn" attention through compensatory performance. It masks vulnerability and exposes the heroine's underlying anxiety about attractiveness, femininity, and romantic value.

Consider another example:

(7) *The next day, I wake up to a chilly bedroom* [7, p. 68].

This example illustrates a case of coercion by enrichment, in which contextual information expands the semantic interpretation of the verbal construction beyond its prototypical meaning. The coercive effect emerges from the interaction between the phrasal verb *wake up to* and the noun phrase *a chilly bedroom*.

The context is important for understanding the function of the construction. Here, the protagonist, Sasha, is emotionally exhausted and psychologically overwhelmed by professional stress. Her mother persuades her to leave her usual environment and go on a temporary escape trip intended to help her recover mentally and emotionally. The trip represents a disruption of routine and a transition into a space associated with uncertainty, vulnerability, and self-reflection. The narrative therefore foregrounds Sasha's altered emotional state and heightened sensitivity to her surroundings.

In its literal sense, the verb phrase *wake up to* typically refers to becoming conscious of or noticing something upon waking. However, many prototypical uses involve dynamic sensory stimuli or events: *wake up to music, wake up to birds singing, wake up to bad news*. In the present example, the complement *a chilly bedroom* denotes not an event but a static environmental condition. This creates a semantic mismatch between the experiential construction and the noun phrase it selects.

The mismatch is resolved through coercion. The reader implicitly reconstructs an omitted experiential scenario: Sasha wakes up and immediately becomes physically and emotionally aware of the cold atmosphere surrounding her. Thus, the construction acquires an expanded meaning approximating ‘wake up and experience / find oneself in a chilly bedroom.’ The contextual enrichment supplies sensory and affective dimensions not explicitly encoded in the sentence.

Importantly, the adjective *chilly* also contributes to the coercive effect because it functions simultaneously on literal and metaphorical levels. Literally, it describes physical coldness. Pragmatically and stylistically, however, it evokes emotional discomfort, alienation, and psychological unease. Since Sasha is undergoing emotional stress and displacement, the physical environment mirrors her internal condition. The coerced interpretation therefore integrates bodily sensation with emotional atmosphere.

From a stylistic perspective, the construction performs several functions typical of English language chick lit narration. First, it creates immediacy and experiential intimacy by presenting perception through the heroine’s embodied consciousness. Second, it externalizes emotional states through environmental description, allowing physical surroundings to reflect psychological tension. Third, the subtle coercive enrichment contributes to the introspective and affective tone characteristic of the genre, where seemingly ordinary descriptions often carry implicit emotional meanings.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that coercion performs a significant functional role in English language chick lit. The genre actively exploits coercion in order to create humour, intensify emotional representation, construct irony, and shape individualized narrative voices. In many cases, coercion allows authors to compress complex experiential meanings into concise and stylistically expressive linguistic forms whose interpretation depends on contextual and pragmatic enrichment. Thus, coercion should be viewed not simply as a mechanism of semantic adjustment but as an important cognitive-discursive and stylistic resource underlying the linguistic creativity of the genre.

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