Don't coerce yourself to death (Laat je niet dwingen)

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Before Arie went to Leiden, he did his research in the language proficiency section of the linguistic institute in Utrecht, at the time led by Eric Reuland. In order to smooth out the stand-offishness between linguists and Arie's direct colleagues (most of them being anti-linguistic), Arie, Paul van den Hoven, Eric and myself formed a workgroup in the hope of creating a joint perspective on the study of language. Its topic was called *coercion*, its goal *cooperation*.

In want of a topic for the present volume and having read the recent *Cooperation and Coercion* by Jenny Audring and Geert Booij (A&B) in *Linguistics* **54**(4), I could not escape from writing about our past shared interest in the notion of coercion. In our group of four, I took the role of taking coercion in the domain of tense and aspect as a form of insipidity, as a too easy way out. So when I saw A&B, I was curious about how it would force me into leaving that skeptic stance.

A&B put the type coercion in *Mary began the book* on a scale between on the one hand semantic flexibility [*drop/discuss the book*] and on the other hand idiomaticity [*to pass out, to fake out, to mellow out*] as a form of constructional meaning expressing 'to go into an unusual mental state'. According to them, all three forms express a different degree of force by which structural semantics overrules lexical meaning. They see the selectional tie between *to drop* and the quale 'object' in *book* as different from that between *to discuss* and the quale 'informative' as a weak form of coercion, the "enrichment" of (1a) by a dummy V in (1b) as a stronger form,

(1)   a. [Mary [$_{\mathrm{VP}}$ began [$_{\mathrm{NP}}$ [a book]]]]
      b. [Mary [$_{\mathrm{VP}}$ began [$_{\mathrm{VP}}$ [$_{\mathrm{V}}$ Δ] [a book]]]]

and the override in idiomatic expressions such as *to veg out* ('act like a vegetable') as the strongest form because its constructional meaning is not (sufficiently) compositionally traceable to the words making it up.

However attractive this picture may be, my skepticism remains for A&B's treatment of "soft coercion" in (2a,b) and "middle" coercion in (2c):

(2)   a. The light flashed until dawn.
      b. He knocked on the door until his knuckles ached.
      c. For months, the train arrived late.

A&B see here a "conflict between point event and time adverbial" (p. 618), but there is no conflict at all if one considers type coercion a purely syntactic operation, in (1) by creating a structure with a VP-interpretation with a dummy V, the range of which is restricted by *Mary* (one person), *began* (things you can begin) and *a book* (one object with certain properties). The obsessive addiction to aspectual Vendler-classes has led to distinguish four **semantic** VP-types, among which the so-called achievements in (2). But does it make sense to apply coercion to ontology? Yes, if we allow Derrida's postmodernism to enter real linguistics. No, if we dig deeper, in my own view.

In that view, the lexical semantics of *flash* and *knock* in (2) can be seen as defining these verbs in terms of a mapping f_α from the reals into the natural numbers, providing discreteness. In both cases, the number of images α of f_α is lexically specified as $|\alpha| \geq 1$. This explains why *The light flashed* and *He knocked on the door* is ambiguous between one flash/knock and an, in principle, unbounded series of flashes and knocks. Thus the *until*-phrases in (2a) and (2b) are simply natural restrictions on an unbounded series of flashes and knocks. No ontological change involved; no coercion at all, just compositionality. In (2c), one has a different story based on the fact that NPs may express a type or a token: (2c) may pertain to locomotive 3009 with exactly the same carriages in the same order at the same spot, but it also allows for a set of different locomotives and carriages, even at different places. No coercion at all; just a systematic distinction between levels.

Conclusion: A&B make an interesting point but should throw out the tense and aspect cases as part of their argument. Do you agree, Arie?