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“WHAT MAKES WHAT BEDFELLOWS?”: PROVERBS VS. PHRASEOSCHEMATA

**Abstract:** The paper deals with explores properties of two Anglo-American proverbs, “Handsome is as handsome does” and “Adversity/politics makes strange bedfellows”, as well as their modifications and derivatives (such as anti-proverbs). The question is raised whether these proverbs may be considered phraseoschemata (the term originally coined by Dmitrij N. Šmelëv for set phrases such as *X kak X* ‘X is a typical specimen of its kind’, lit. ‘X like X’). A phraseoscheme has formalized structural patterns both in its syntax and its figurative meaning with variables that are to be filled in context. Analysing data retrieved from synchronic and diachronic corpora, the paper argues that the aforementioned proverbs and their derivatives retain stable structural patterns (namely, *X is as X does* and *X makes Y bedfellows*) and, therefore, should be regarded as phraseoschemata.

**Keywords:** Anglo-American proverbs, idioms, phraseoschemata, transformations, corpus linguistics

**Introduction**

As is known, there happens to be some variation in proverbs that owes to the existence of fundamental proverb structures such as “Where there’s X, there’s Y,” “No X without Y,” etc. (Mieder 1993: 9). Certain proverbial formulae exist such as the German “man soll P”, which was covered by Archer Taylor in the 1930s (Taylor 1975). Not only are they common for proverbs but for idioms, as well; in the domain of idioms, they are known as *phraseoschemata* (*phrazeoschemy*), a term coined by Dmitrij N. Šmelëv for set phrases such as Russian “X kak X” ‘X is a typical specimen of its kind’ (lit. “X like X”) (Šmelëv 1977). German scholars use a different term, *phraseo-patterns* (*Phraseoschablone*) (Palm 1977). An example of such a *Phraseoschablon* is “einmal X, immer X” ‘once an X, always an X’, e.g., *einmal Lehrer, immer Lehrer* ‘once a teacher, always a teacher.’

This raises a question of whether proverbs that follow similar structural patterns should be considered phraseoschemata. The aim of its paper is to answer it by analysing the variability of two proverbs, namely “Handsome is as handsome does” and “Adversity makes strange bedfellows.”

### ***The Theory Behind the Phraseoschemata***

A phraseoscheme seemingly belongs to the domain of syntax rather than that of phraseology and paremiology. It has been noted that phraseoschemata are close to the constructions in construction grammar (CxG); see (Baranov, Dobrbovol’skij 2008). Besides, the constructions such as *let alone* are as idiomatic as figurative units, e.g. idioms or proverbs; see, for instance, (Fillmore, Kay & O’Connor 1988). They may also be close to reduplication used for intensifying and disambiguating, cf. the “X-X” pattern in the English *It’s a tuna salad, not salad salad* or the Russian *èto byla derevnâ-derevnâ* ‘it was a real village through and through’ (literally, ‘it was a village-village’), *takaâ devočka-devočka* ‘such a girly’ (‘such a girl-girl’) (Gilyarova 2010) and the “X X<sub>instr</sub>” pattern in Russian (*pen’ pnëm* ‘a real dimwit’, lit. ‘a stump by a stump’, *durak durakom* ‘a complete and utter fool’, lit. ‘a fool by a fool’). As one can see, this type of morphologically and syntactically bound reduplication is also phraseoschematic. What differentiates it from the “X-X” pattern is a somewhat greater degree of idiomaticity<sup>1</sup> (i.e. the sum of reinterpretation, differing degrees of opacity of . Somewhat similar to reduplication are the “X kak X” and “X on in v Afrike X” patterns found in Russia (literally, ‘X like X’ and ‘X is still X even in Africa’). Their figurative meaning is ‘a certain X has typical features of the set of X-like objects’, cf. the line in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pnin*: *Yes, I see, vizhu, vizhu, kampus kak kampus: The usual kind of thing.*

From the standpoint of reproducibility, fixedness, and idiomaticity, phraseoschemata are quite regular. Consider, for instance, the Russian “hot’ V<sub>2SgImp.</sub>” (*hot’ zalejsâ, hot’v bočke soli, hot’ plač’* – literally, ‘you might as well get flooded / have it salted in a barrel / weep’). All of them are used for intensifying the meaning of the word or clause to which they are attached (in the framework of Igor Mel’čuk’s Meaning–Text Theory they would be defined as *Magn*). The whole phraseoscheme should be put down as follows: (P) – *hot’ VP/V<sub>2SgImp</sub> F (P)*, where *F* stands for a lexical

function (a term widely used in MTT) indicating the most relevant and/or plausible action in the situation P that affects all its participants, cf. *bezvyhodnoe polozenie* ‘desperate situation’ vs. *[polozenie takoe, chto] hot’ plac’* ‘[the situation is so desperate that] one might as well weep’, *ocen’ mnogo X* ‘there is a lot of X [commodity]’ vs. *X stol’ko, chto hot’ v bocke soli* ‘there is so much X that one might as well have it salted in a barrel’.

The following sections of this paper are aimed at establishing whether the idiomaticity of two English proverbs is more or less regular.

### ***The Case of “Handsome Is as Handsome Does”***

The peculiarities of this proverb and its structure have been covered in *The Proverb Process* by Stephen David Winick’s (Winick 1998) – to be precise, in the chapter aptly named *Proverb is as Proverb Does*. In it, Winick analysed the relatively recent structural pattern that appeared because of *Forrest Gump* by Winston Groom and its film adaptation by Robert Zemeckis. These works of art have popularised the saying, “Stupid is as Stupid Does.” The “Gumpisms” of this kind have become so widespread that, as Winick demonstrates, they virtually become eponymous with conventional wisdom; for instance, they are ridiculed by Bruce Springsteen along with more “traditional” proverbs (Winick 1998: 97).

However, this variability of the adjective (“X is as X does”) is not as recent as it seems. The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) reveals a degree of variability of its constituents as early as 1848, e.g. “Pretty is as pretty does” and variants with alternate spellings like *purty*, *han’sum*, and *handsum*.

*“Handsum is as handsum does,” is a old and true sayin’*  
(1848; FIC; Major Jones’s Sketches) (COHA).

The situation with “Stupid is as stupid does” is somewhat paradoxical: the synchronic Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) reveals that it is used more frequently than “Handsome is as handsome does.” The former accounts for 62 citations out of 193, whereas the latter is found only in nine entries, being mostly replaced by “Pretty is as pretty does.” Interestingly enough, most contexts containing “Stupid is as stupid does” date

back to 2012 and involve Barack Obama's reforms and electoral campaigns in one way or another, cf.:

Considering that our taxes already go to pay for medical care (including various forms of BC) for those unable to pay, this whole issue is a really trivial and stupid reason to be against Obamacare (but, *stupid is as stupid does, I guess...*). (2012; WEB; watchdog.com) (COCA).

More often than not, these quotations have direct references to *Forrest Gump*, e.g.: *What was it Forrest's Mom said? Something like "Stupid is as stupid does." or something like that* (2012; WEB; theburningplatform.com) (COCA). However, the variability of the proverb goes beyond "Gumpisms" of this kind. COCA reveals that the adjectival constituent tends to be replaced with an adjective or a noun relevant in the particular context, e.g. *happy is as happy does, scary is as scary does, liberal is as liberal does*, etc. Cf.:

**a.** From an evolutionary viewpoint, it is very much true that "*intelligence is as intelligence does*". Plants have survived for epochs with little genetic change and less intelligence. Until supra-intelligent humans have matched that lifespan the jury is still out as to whether picking up sapience was really all that "good" for us. (2012; BLOG; patterico.com) (COCA). **b.** As to Obama's socialism, In your self-proclaimed research, surely you must have uncovered by now enough evidence that he has a clear-cut socialist AGENDA for the country. Even a dummy like me has figured that out by now. Does that make him a card-carrying socialist? Frankly, I don't give a hoot. *Socialism is as socialism does* to my half-witted way of thinking (with apologies to Tom Hanks). (2012; WEB; dailyrepublic.com) (COCA).

Both the structure and the figurative meanings are formed on a regular basis, with "X is as X does" meaning something like 'the background, affiliation or identity of X has to be determined be judged upon by its actual function or performance.' Thus, one may safely assume that the phraseoscheme "X is as X does" has formed. This phraseoscheme may itself be subjected to structural

changes that are able to deprive it of its idiomaticity altogether, cf.:

The previous examples may suggest that humor is always manufactured for consumption; that *humor is as humorists do*. Not so. We may find experiences humorous as well. (2012; WEB; hughlafollette.com) (COCA).

Here, the only difference between this phrase and a regular free word group is the syntax and combinability: *as humorists do* instead of *what humorists do*. The structural pattern is altered, “X is as X does” turning into “X is as Y do”, where Y is a derivative of X.

***The Case of “Adversity Makes Strange Bedfellows”***

In *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, Jennifer Speake comments on the proverb in the following way,

While the underlying idea remains the same, there has always been some variation in the first word of the proverb: see also POLITICS makes strange bedfellows. (Speake 2009: 21).

Consequently, the proverb shall hereinafter be referred to as “Adversity/politics makes strange bedfellows.” The figurative meaning can be defined as ‘there is certain unlikely affiliation between participants of a certain situation; the affiliation owes its existence to adversity or politics’. This section of the paper aims at defining the variation of constituents in this proverb more precisely, as well as at finding out whether the proverb in question can be considered a phraseoscheme. There are 28 entries citing the proverb in the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA), and 61 entries in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). In both, the most frequent first constituent of the proverb is *politics* (10 occurrences in COHA, 16 in COCA). The first source found in the corpora dates back to 1870 and is quoted below.

But one can never say what these politicians mean; and I shall let this variety grow until after the next election, at least; although I hear that the fruit is small, and rather sour. If there is any variety of strawberries that really declines to run, and devotes itself to a private life of fruit-

bearing, I should like to get it. I may mention here, since we are on politics, that the Doolittle raspberries had sprawled all over the strawberry-bed's: *so true is it that politics makes strange bedfellows*. (1870; FIC; Warner, Charles Dudley, 1829-1900; *My Summer in a Garden*) (COHA).

In this example, the proverb occurs in a relative clause. This occurrence is found in both synchrony and microdiachrony (within the span of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries). A schematic outline for a typical clause would be *P because/for/since politics makes strange bedfellows*, where the proverb would explain and explicate the proposition in the main clause.

Variation of first constituent includes substituting it with another one such as *misfortune* (a) or expanding it such as *politics and religion* (b), or by adnominal modification (c) akin to those found in idioms (Dobrovol'skij 2008; Omazić 2008). Example (c) is also peculiar in the way the proverb is transformed as the metaphor evolves: *it [American politics] is making for active, absent ones [bedfellows]*.

**a.** "You knew him! A waiter, you!" "Yes. *Misfortune makes strange bedfellows*. It was either that or starvation. I preferred to wait." (1921; FIC; George Gibbs. *The Vagrant Duke*) (COHA). **b.** Karl rolled up his sleeves, and went to work. In the end, even Billy Graham sold his soul to Rove and scrubbed his website of the Mormon cultist references. We'll see if this spiritual conversion holds, or if the website reverts back to its narrowness. *Politics and religion make strange bedfellows, don't they?* (2012; BLOG; Daily Kos: let's all take a moment to remember Karl Rove) (COCA). **c.** *WHETHER or not American politics makes strange bedfellows, it assuredly is making for active, absent ones* in election year 1972. (1972; Time Magazine: 1972/10/09; Bittersweet Homecoming of Three Pilots) (COHA).

The proverb may be played on, as in the following context.

Giulia felt like the man who survives pneumonia only to discover that his heart has been weakened forever. Worst of all she found that *misery doesn't necessarily make*

*strange bedfellows – or any bedfellows at all.* (1947; FIC; John Horne Burns. *The Gallery*) (COHA).

The reason why this proverb allows for such variation is simple. The idea behind it can be phrased in the following way: ‘for certain serious reasons (connected to politics, adversity, etc.), even the most unlikely persons or entities may become partners.’ Thus, the variation serves one purpose, that of stating the reason behind the unlikely partnership. In other words, the proverb can be presented schematically as *X makes strange bedfellows*.

But what kind of *X* might it be? Clearly, most of the substitute constituents are abstract nouns; it is safe to assume that if the first constituent is substituted with a non-abstract noun, the modification is less standard. Cf.:

This week the undisputed winner is AvX: Consequences #4 taking the number one spot in Great Britain, U.S.A., France, Italy, Brazil, Ireland, Sweden and Norway, proving that just because the fighting has stopped doesn't mean we can't stop making people feel bad about it. Cyclops. Ah-hem. (Cyclops was right). Meanwhile *miniature Batman make strange bedfellows as Australia, Japan & Israel go batty (oof.) for Lil' Batman* (2012; BLOG; ComiXology Takes Over the World) (COCA).

Quite obviously, the *X* tends to be context-based. However, the proverb is prone to creative modifications and double-take effect, sometimes both with context-based substitution, cf.:

*Coal, like politics, makes strange bedfellows.* But these days in Washington, *coal is political.* (2012; BLOG; Questions surround coal terminal's impact on Spokane – Spokesman) (COCA).

Similar creative modifications based on double-take effect are listed in Anna T. Litovkina and Wolfgang Mieder's dictionary *Old Proverbs Never Die, They Just Diversify* (Litovkina, Mieder 2006) along with other anti-proverbs. These anti-proverbs may involve syntactical transformations (e.g. cleft constructions like *The bedfellows politics makes are never strange. It only seems that way to those that have not watched the courtship*) and modifications (e.g.

the expansion of the idiom in *Politics makes strange bedfellows – rich* (Ibid.: 260–261).

Apart from the variation of the first constituent, there is some variation of the adjective. The only constituent that is frozen and unchangeable is *bedfellows*, cf.:

**a.** This 'new' General Medical Services contract was one in a series of Government initiatives to make primary care more businesslike, even though anyone who has worked in healthcare in the UK will be aware that *the principles of business and the NHS do not always make comfortable bedfellows*. (2012; ACAD; Ed Warren. *A survival guide to Directed Enhanced Services: The new DES Implications for primary care*; Practice Nurse, 7/19/2013, Vol. 43 Issue 7, p28-32. 4p.) (COCA). **b.** I contend that *art and historic buildings make great bedfellows*. (1998; NEWS; Catherine Fox. *Nexue owes everything to her; After 15 years, Louise Shaw leaves stamp on venue for contemporary art*; Atlanta Journal Constitution) (COCA).

It is evident that, despite all the variability, the proverb has the same structural pattern, as well as the pattern of a figurative meaning. The meaning of “X [and Y] make Z bedfellows” can be defined as ‘there is a certain Z affiliation between X and Y caused by their properties.’ This meaning is more generalized than that of “X makes strange bedfellows” that was provided at the beginning of this section.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of the phraseoscheme overlaps with those of constructions in CxG (which include both fixed expressions and morphemes), idioms, and proverbs. The phraseoscheme is a fixed expression (clause or sentence) that is based on a regular model, both structurally and semantically, and has obligatory variables to be filled in in a particular context. The structure of their figurative meaning allows for greater generalisation than that of separate proverbs (or anti-proverbs). As one can see, the two proverbs cited in this paper can be referred to as phraseoschemata.



**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Idiomaticity of a figurative unit is the combination of reinterpretation of its figurative meaning, opacity, and increased complexity of referring to its denotation. Cf. *a person's thoughts and conscious reactions to events, perceived in a continuous manner* vs. *stream of consciousness*. See also (Baranov, Dobrovol'skij 2008).

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