FROM RAGS TO RICHES ... AND BEYOND

DMITRI A. BORGMANN
Dayton, Washington

In the August, 1984 issue of Word Ways, John Henrick took the pedestrian phrase FROM BIRTH TO DEATH, and presented twenty more colorful equivalents for it, including such phrases as FROM THE CRADLE TO THE GRAVE, FROM BASKET TO CASKET, and FROM SQUALL HEARERS TO PALL BEARERS. Each of the equivalents was logologically interesting, using such devices as alliteration, rhyme, transposition of consonant sounds, metaphor, and/or metonymy.

I was able to add a considerable number of examples to Henrick's collection of phrases. That fact set me to thinking about the general problem which Henrick had particularized. It seemed to me that it should be possible to refurbish almost any cliché involving a contrast, in a similar fashion. To test my theory, I decided to see what I could do with the well-known phrase FROM RAGS TO RICHES. Over a period of several days, I found nearly 300 equivalents, using devices such as those enumerated above. My list, not ordered in any particular fashion, follows:

From a little to a lot
From least to most
From wretches to riches
From famine to fame
From poverty to property
From whining to winning
From scrounging to lounging
From digging ditches to hoarding riches
From a mission to a mansion
From dearth to wealth
From begging to binge-ing
From many rags to moneybags
From pauper class to upper class
From many in shacks to money in stacks
From poor to Porsche
From scraps to scrips
From underprivileged to upper-privileged
From schlimazel to mazel tov
From ne'er-do-well to e'er-do-well
From a hovel to a heaven
From a great dole to a great deal
From nothing to everything
From being a servant to having servants
From porridges to Porsches
From charity to surety
From welfare-ing to faring well
From workless to worryless
From cold meals to gold deals
From mills (tenths of cents) to millions
From bills (that you owe) to billions
From handouts often to tens of thousands
From no maids to diamonds
From relief chiseler to riches for real
From owing to owning
From nil to all
From street Arab to oil-rich Arab
From financial plight to financial might
From sad sacks to money sacks
From a few cents to affluence
From less to more
From peasant underclass to pheasant under glass
From privation to approbation
From lo, pence! to opulence (an anagram)
From filthy wretch to filthy rich
From beggar to banker
From privation to profusion
From woe to dough
From a sacked checker to an exchequer
From lack to luck
From debit to credit
From doom to boom
From bound and in stocks to stocks and bonds
From sans un sou to insouciant
From destitution to restitution
From squalid to solid
From down-at-the-heels to well-heeled
From famishing to flourishing
From the crash to more cash
From torn stockings to silk-stockings
From distress to possess
From insolvent to insouciant
From low water to high tide
From broken fortune to luck 'n' fortune
From a money pinch to a money pouch
From inferiority to superiority
From a bare subsistence to a sure existence
From dives (low, cheap places) to dives (a rich man)
From a starving, ill-paid soul to a starring, well-paid role
From balance-sheet zeros to financial heroes
From money hassles to many castles
From peculiar dross to pecuniary redress
From some pittance to a princely sum
From ciphers to sapphires
From Skid Road to Park Avenue
From poorhouse to palace
From knave to knight
From hard up to hoard? yup!
From hobo pennies to polo ponies
From a loyal workin' stuff to a royal park 'n' staff
From fool's gold to walls o' gold
From the valley of despair to a prized villa
From Poorsville to a villa in Paris
From a Bowery bum to a dowry "plum"
From a needy bairn to a greedy baron
From losing with a pair o' dice to lazing in a paradise
From immersion in rags to Persian rugs
From a workhouse to a dream house
From big bums to large sums
From trash to cash
From losing to grossing
From just a touch to blessed with much
From a minor hobo to a major-domo
From healthy but poor to wealthy for sure
From beagle droppings to regal trappings
From a healthy chump to a wealthy champ
From bankrupt to bank holdup
From gloom to boom
From financial ruin to a monetary reign
From broke to brocade
From a poor Robin Hood to a store-robber hood
From mobocrat to plutocrat
From checks that bounce to huge accounts
From beachcomber to bank owner
From human scum to a giant sum
From frugal to regal
From time payments to prepayments
From yearnings to earnings
From a flat wallet to a fat wallet
From piles of unpaid bills to piles of $1000 bills
From sans sous to Sans Souci
From financial embarrassment to an embarrassment of riches
From strapped for dough to money to blow
From too little mazuma to the wealth of Montezuma
From penurious to pecunious
From tribulation to trillions
From the plucky poor to the lucky rich
From hunger pains to capital gains
From fortitude to plenitude
From dreams of money to streams of money
From straitened circumstances to straightened-out circumstances
From bouncing checks to cruise-ship decks
From crisis to Croesus
From a ratty cellar to a Rockefeller
From indigence to independence
From the blight of poverty to a knight with property
From hard up to holdup (proving that crime does pay!)
From wretches so seedy to riches, indeedy!
From filth to wealth
From unbalanced budgets to shiny gold nuggets
From sordid to splendid
From debtor’s prison cells to gushing oil from wells
From indigence to affluence
From precious little to precious metal
From skinny waifs to money safes
From squalor to splendor
From threadbare coats to large bank notes
From a wolf at the door to a bull on the stock market
From patches to riches
From in the dumps to holding the trumps
From quicksands to thousands
From tenements to opulence
From out at the seams to living one’s dreams
From scurvy to marvy
From hand-me-downs to a thousand crowns (British silver coins)
From trials to trillions
From starveling to princeling
From a being base to a Ming vase
From nothing to earn to money to burn
From wino to rhino (money)
From being in a mean way to having ways and means
From ill-to-do to well-to-do
From as poor as a church mouse to a richly-furnished house
From mumper to mogul
From hunger faintings to rare old paintings
From scrimps to scrips
From tatterdemalions to a lotta simoleons
From nihility to infinity
From stalling creditors to sterling credit
From down in the dumps to over the humps
From trivial stuff to more than enough
From hobo to nabob
From chicken feed to checks, indeed
From heavy fines to heavenly fineries
From cupboards bare to bucks to spare
From adversity to prosperity
From a sleazy beat to Easy Street
From mere hints of money to here – mints of money
From forfeits to profits
From weeping to reaping
From a little bouillon to a lot of bullion
From dilapidated to revalidated
From hobo cadgers to heavy ledgers
From slim pickings to portly kings
From a homeless tyke to a business tycoon
From hoping to reaping
From the wish to the cash
From assistance to assets
From needing subsistence doles to reaching financial goals
From loans to owns
From sad and low to a wad of dough
From charred trash to hard cash
From many indigents to money instruments
From clown to crown
From a filthy lacker (one who lack) to filthy lucre
From bare sustenance to real substance
From sad vagrancy to hard currency
From chiffonier (a raggpicker, in French) to chevalier
From chiffonier to cavalier
From chiffonier to financier
From minus to plus
From jobless to joyful
From flat (apartment) rats to fat cats
From paying the fiddler to calling the tune
From litter to glitter
From park bench to Park Avenue
From lying low to flying high
From forlorn to reborn
From growing old in tatters to owning all that matters
From squalid to splendid
From crumbs to sums
From financelessness to fanciness
From a street-Arab "chic" to a rich Arab sheik
From facing debts to placing bets
From cleaning stables to owning sables (fur coats)
From a wet gutter to a jet-setter
From a nobody to a somebody
From owing debts to owning jets
From misery to mastery
From layoffs to payoffs
From hardships to lordships
From shack to cash (a phonetic reversal)
From humility to hauteur
From cheap huts to the heights
From desperation to aspiration
From out of a job to boy, what a snob
From down below to up above
From only one’s self to truckloads of pelf
From peanuts to palaces
From hardship to hard cash
From holes in one’s socks to Mr. Got Rocks
From dreadful to delightful
From ruin to rule
From out of work to a wealthy jerk
From begging to bragging
From city slums to goodly sums
From living on charity’s quarters to living in wonderful quarters
From just mush to real plush
From poor boy to great joy
From luckless lad to Lady Luck
From a measly few dimes to the really good times
From poverty-stricken to honest gold-brickin'
From human flotsam to humongous flotillas
From merely drunken drifters to money to the rafters
From a little gutter to a lot better
From unemployed to overjoyed
From ordure to verdure
From jalopies to jillions
From merely drunken drifters to money to the rafters
From cheap, inner-city "digs" to a winner - pretty big
From a little gutter to a lot better
From unemployed to overjoyed
From ordure to verdure
From pennies to monies
From zilch to zillions
From Satan's claws to Santa Claus
From satanic clauses to Santa Claus
From malevolent provenance to benevolent Providence
From a tragic life to a magic life
From Satan to Santa (an anagram)
From fall to rise
From a dog's end to a godsend (an anagram)
From no dough for noodles to oodles of dough
From nixed to fixed
From fetid to feted
From a grave situation to a saved situation
From beastly rags to costly raiment
From without pay to with payout (an anagram)
From raggedy to uppity
From underling to "wonderling"
From scrimpng to scillions
From Skid Row to skillions
From nix to checks
From nix to bucks
From underdog to the whole hog
From nuttin' to struttin'
From taking to giving
From dingy cellar to penthouse dweller
From a bread line to cloud nine
From miser to master
From bread lines to gold mines
From barely making it to merrily raking it in
From penury to luxury
From savers laid low to rivers of dough
From hardships to ships coming in
From austerity to prosperity
From "starvation" dinners to gigantic winners
From an empty plate to silver plate
From beastly rags to costly raiment
From barely making it to merrily raking it in
From penury to luxury
From savers laid low to rivers of dough
From hardships to ships coming in
From austerity to prosperity
From "starvation" dinners to gigantic winners
From an empty plate to silver plate
From being flat broke to 'twas just a joke!
From faking wealth to making wealth
From mendicants to stick-up men (so, crime doth pay!)
From real short of money to we're rich, my honey!
From nix to max
From remnants to eminence
From taking freebies to giving rubies
From a child in sorrow to a golden tomorrow
From horrendous to humongous
From humbleness to haughtiness
From tin cups to gold crowns (comparison of chemical elements)
From parsimony to money 'n' Paris
From potluck to pot o' gold
From potluck to good luck
From skimping to skillions

My experience with the cliché FROM RAGS TO RICHES suggests strongly that it is, indeed, possible to take any phrase revolving around a contrast of opposites or of complementary concepts, preparing a long list of equivalents for it. The problem is, therefore, not an immensely challenging one. The realm of contrasts does, on the other hand, offer us more difficult — and, therefore, logically more worthwhile — problems with which to test our mettle.

One such problem is that posed by the fact that some words present two or more opposites or complementary concepts. This circumstance was brought home to me vividly many years ago by a rebus puzzle contest in which one of the objects depicted was a sign reading OPPOSITE OF "OUT". The obvious answer was IN, but that answer did not help solve the puzzle. The word desired eventually turned out to be from the realm of baseball: SAFE. Since seeing that rebus puzzle, I have paid particular attention to multiple opposites and complementary terms. RIGHT, for instance, is the antithesis of both LEFT and WRONG; LIGHT contrasts either with DARK or with HEAVY; and EITHER may be matched either with OR or with NEITHER.

Some terms have a multiplicity of correlatives. To revert to Henrik's interest in DEATH for a moment, I can relate that word to BIRTH, LIFE, REBIRTH, RESURRECTION, SICKNESS, SLEEP, and CATALEPTIC TRANCE. Readers will probably be able to find some further matches for DEATH. My own interest, however, is not in a run-of-the-mill example, particularly one as grisly as death. Instead, what I am seeking is the one concept for which a larger number of opposites and complements can be adduced than for any other concept. What might that concept be?

I advance the term MAN, for which at least 21 matches exist: God, child, woman, animal, officer, superman, world, nature, future man, machine, mouse, boy, preman, wife, material, universe, ape, society, environment, monkey, and automaton. Each is logical in a particular context; for example, MAN versus OFFICER is appropriate if rank in a military force is the issue. How many additional contrasts involving MAN are there? Is there any other term which invites a larger number of comparisons? I invite readers to think about this problem, submitting their findings to the editor for future publication in Word Ways.