

<https://doi.org/10.29162/pv.43.1.1200>

UDC 811.111'373.7:81'42:305=111

Original scientific paper

Received on 20 February 2026

Accepted for publication on 30 April 2026

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PROVERBS AND GENDER STEREOTYPES: A COGNITIVE-DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE PROVERB *BOYS WILL BE BOYS*

Men of quality do not fear equality
Anonymous

Abstract: The paper presents a cognitive-discursive study of the gendered proverb *Boys will be boys* with the focus on its actional and meta-linguistic dimensions. The main aim is to explore the discursive dichotomy of the dictum, i.e. its role in 1) perpetuating gender stereotypes about men and reinforcing gendered expectations in Anglo-American society, and, more recently, in 2) reflecting and promoting change catalyzed by the gender equality movement. The material comprises 400 examples, including texts from online articles, opinion pieces, blogs, social media posts, and memes spanning the past twenty years. The research methods applied were Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Sociocognitive Discourse Studies (SCDS) methodology, complemented by the linguo-cultural method, stylistic analysis, sampling and corpus methodology. The comprehensive analysis of the linguistic, cognitive, and discursive profiles of the dictum *Boys will be boys* suggests that the gender stereotype embedded in the proverb is being challenged and redefined in discourse, both via canonical and recycled (modified) use, resulting in anti-proverbs. The anti-proverbial derivations attest to significant shifts in social norms and encapsulate sociopolitical change.

Key words: *Boys will be boys*, gendered proverbs, anti-proverbs, gender stereotypes, discourse-gender dyad, sociopolitical discourse

1. Introduction

Language-gender studies have evolved into a fertile and expansive field of research since their formal emergence in the 20th century, stemming from feminist linguistics. More specifically, contemporary research has shifted its focus towards the discourse-gender dyad. This analytical vantage point is relevant for the inquiry into the discursive use of “gendered language”, which, according to Jule, perpetuates “the historical patriarchal hierarchy ... that has existed between men and women, where one (man) is considered the norm, and the other (woman) is marked as other – as something quite different from the norm” (Jule 2018: 20). Conversely, the tendency to deploy gender-inclusive language seeks to promote gender equality, eradicate gender bias, and avoid stereotypes.

My observations of the use of proverbs in the discourse of contemporary sociopolitical movements indicate that their agenda can be transmitted via two discursive modes: reflective and actional (Konstantinova 2022b: 144–45). The former encompasses texts intended to critically assess sociopolitical reality; the latter includes texts designed to encourage civic engagement or to function as a call to action. Proverbs as a rhetorical strategy of the sociopolitical discourse concerning gender inequality have been found to possess significant *actional* potential; indeed, paremias serve as a transformative and quite frequently rectifying discursive force (Konstantinova 2023).

In light of Zykova’s perspective on phraseology and gender studies, the paremiological repertoire of a language is regarded as a “cultural cross-section of a given people,” which reveals its two salient dichotomous characteristics: 1) long-term preservation of culturally significant knowledge, and 2) immediate responsiveness or sensitivity to current sociocultural shifts. The paremiological landscape, therefore, provides a lens through which to examine the concepts of masculinity and femininity as well as the deeply entrenched gender stereotypes associated with them (Zykova 2014). This fine-tuning to change accounts for the *actional* potential of proverbs.

Being a gendered phrase underscoring patriarchal domination in society, the proverb *Boys will be boys* is inextricably connected with the concept of “masculinity” (and also “toxic mascu-

linity”); it has continuously been in the spotlight of sociopolitical discourse on the issue of gender inequality and feminist activism for equal rights. Several activists have advocated for the ban of the dictum from common parlance (see, e.g., Meyer 2014; “Why ‘Boys Will Be Boys’ but Not ‘Girls Will Be Girls?’” 2018). It can be argued that within this arena, its actional capacity turns the dictum into a *proverb in-action*.

Thus, the article attempts to provide a perspective on how paremiological inquiry can contribute to our understanding of gender and power/dominance relations in society through the investigation of the discourse-level phenomena of the language-gender dyad. The main goal was to explore the discursive dichotomy of the proverb *Boys will be boys*, i.e. its role in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes about men and reinforcement of gendered expectations in Anglo-American society, and its recent discursive use to reflect and promote change catalyzed by the gender equality movement. To achieve this objective, the following tasks were performed: first, the linguistic, cognitive, and discursive profiles of the proverb were examined with special focus on its actional and metalinguistic dimensions; second, the instances of canonical and non-canonical (modified) use were delineated; and, third, the anti-proverbial recycling of the dictum was analyzed.

2. Methods and empirical data

The overarching methodological framework for the conducted study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which is an interdisciplinary research movement that regards language as social practice and considers the context of language use fundamental to understanding power and dominance dynamics. As Fairclough and Wodak argue, discursive practices may exert major ideological and political influence determining the way power is distributed in societies (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258). CDA analysts address these issues by exploring “the role of discourse in the re(production) and challenge of dominance, i.e. the enactment of social power by elites, institutions or groups”, which results, among other effects, in *gender inequality* (Van Dijk 1993: 249–250). Their primary concern lies in the examination of dis-

cursive structures and strategies that enable the perpetuation of social dominance.

More specifically, for the purposes of the present research, the collected data was analyzed through the lens of Sociocognitive Discourse Studies (SCDS), which is a multidisciplinary type of CDA that relates discourse structures to social structures through a *cognitive interface*, i.e. a “communicative Common Ground and the shared social knowledge” (Van Dijk 2017: 28).

The three-profile approach suggested by Konstantinova (2021) was implemented. This methodological perspective has proved relevant in case studies of individual proverbs as it helps to organize observations into linguistic, cognitive, and discursive “folders”, elucidating the cognitive processes in which communicative goals are correlated with specific verbal and/or non-verbal packaging in actual discourse (Konstantinova 2022a, 2023).

Linguocultural and stylistic analyses were employed as auxiliary methods for the examination of the empirical material. For sampling the instances of discursive use of the proverb *Boys will be boys* and its modifications, the corpus linguistics methodology (the iWeb corpus search); Google and Yahoo searches were applied. The collected corpus mainly includes texts from online articles, opinion pieces and essays, blogs, social media posts, and memes (approximately 400 contexts) spanning the past twenty years.

3. Theoretical framework

The present research is grounded in the following theoretical underpinnings: the cognitive-discursive paradigm in proverb studies and Sociocognitive Discourse Studies with a focus on the discourse-gender dyad. A synthesis of these frameworks is expected to provide a deeper insight into the “discursive valence” of a proverb.

The research is based on the postulate that proverbs belong to the group of linguo-cultural items that constitute core elements of the cognitive base (“background knowledge”) shared by a linguo-cultural community. Since they are *mental representations* (frames) of valuable experience, their cognitive function is interconnected with their cultural function, i.e., the conveyance

of cultural meanings, stereotypes, prescriptions, etc. Research has systematically proved that “*cognitive processes and representations* cause and control all human action and interaction and hence also *all language use and discourse*” (*italics added* – A.K.) (see, e.g., Van Dijk 2017: 30).

It has been noted that the discursive deployment of some proverbs goes beyond their didactic or other pragmatic purposes; they develop a repertoire of novel social meanings evolving into socially endorsed “reference points”. Such adages provide social actors with epistemological and axiological foundations for processing reality (Konstantinova 2023, Moreno 2025). They, therefore, become *metalinguage*, i.e. they are used as linguistic tools (with their well-known and universally recognized key wording and imagery supported by a solid cultural background) to introduce and explain existing or new sociopolitical phenomena. Quite paradoxically, as it may seem, this metalinguistic quality becomes even more evident in modified proverbs (especially, anti-proverbs) due to the structural and semantic corrections traditional texts undergo to convey change.

The metalinguistic dimension of proverbs often manifests itself in their use as *speech formulae*. In other words, they engage in “proverbsplaining”. In Baranov and Dobrovolskiy’s theoretical framework, certain idioms serve “as verbal commentaries on communicators’ actions” in discourse. The authors of the seminal work *Aspects of the Phraseological Theory* point out that speech formulae (or “pragmatic idioms”) are idioms with a fixed pragmatic value and a context-dependent meaning that are used to manage social interaction (Baranov and Dobrovolskiy 2008: 78). Thus, their primary function is to comment on non-trivial aspects of communication, which shifts discourse to a *metalevel* moving from simple transmission of information to the level of subjective evaluation (Baranov and Dobrovolskiy 2008: 82).

Another tenet underpinning the present study is that language “is not just a reflection of society, but is involved in the construction and perpetuation of social realities” (Jule 2018: 19). It is, therefore, argued that proverbs, especially gendered dictums, have to be studied through the lens of their actional potential. It follows, then, that to explore the language-gender dynamics we must focus on discourse – the interface and critical

mechanism that not only reflects and preserves stereotypes but also encapsulates and drives change.

The systematic study of gender within sociolinguistics and discourse analysis began in the early 1970s, catalyzed largely by second-wave feminism. As noted by Tannen, it is now an interdisciplinary field spanning gender and women's studies (Tannen 2015: 639). Historically, language-gender research has focused on two primary linguistic domains: the phonological variations in the speech of men and women, and the distinct conversational styles manifested during gendered interactions (Wodak 2017: 1). One of the milestones in this field was the work of Robin Lakoff, whose pioneering insights laid the foundation for feminist linguistics by seeking to expose linguistic gender inequality and provide a framework to eradicate gender bias (see, e.g., Lakoff 1973, 1990). Discourse-gender dyad research operates on the premise that attention to *actual* language use can “denaturalize an assumed male privilege and the patriarchal system that secures it” (Jule 2018: 22) and thus focuses on power-gender dynamics.

Critical Discourse Analysis and, specifically, Sociocognitive Discourse Studies outlined earlier establish a rigorous conceptual basis for the investigation of top-down relations of dominance and bottom-up relations of acceptance/resistance. As Van Dijk points out, “an analysis of *strategies of resistance and challenge* is crucial for our understanding of actual power and dominance relations in society” and “such an analysis needs to be included in a broader theory of power, *counter-power* and *discourse*” (*cur-sive added – A.K.*) (Van Dijk 1993: 250). Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of how dominance and gender inequality are perpetuated and reproduced in discourse calls for a rigorous study of the *social and mental representations (or constructs)* held by social actors.

Thus, consolidating these invaluable research frameworks, mine is a paremiologist's approach aiming at exploring the metalinguistic function of proverbs in discourse, i.e. their role in reflecting and verbalizing social change.

4. Analysis of the material

4.1. Linguistic profile of the proverb

In the case of the proverb *Boys will be boys*, it is essential to begin with its general dictionary meaning which, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is “expressing resignation regarding an (undesirable) aspect of the behavior of a boy or young man, as being supposedly characteristic of his age or sex” (“Boys will be boys” 2025).

Due to its grammatical and lexical minimalism, the proverb under discussion has a very categorical tone. Its interpretation, however, largely depends on the speakers’ cultural (stereotypical) background knowledge. In other words, the proverb is a gendered phrase encapsulating a social stereotype and is characterized by discursive ambiguity (which will be discussed further), i.e. it allows for various interpretations.

As far as the origin of the proverb is concerned, several authoritative sources provide different dates. It is believed to have derived from the Latin proverb *Children (boys) are children (boys) and do childish things* (*Sunt pueri pueri, pueri puerilia tractant*) (Ammer 2013: 52). According to *A Dictionary of American Proverbs*, the phrase *Boys will be boys* was first recorded in English in 1589 in *Censure of Martin Junior* (Mieder et al. 1992: 65). However, the date was corrected to 1832 in a more recent *Dictionary of Authentic American Proverbs* (Mieder 2021: 55).

The Oxford English Dictionary cites the phrase as first used in R. Griffith’s *Letters Henry & Frances* (ed. 3) vol. VI in 1770 (“Boy, n.1 and int.” 2025). Gary Martin, the author of the Meanings and Origins section at the major British resource *The Phrasefinder* (<https://www.phrases.org.uk/>), supports the claim that the earliest reference of the phrase to be found is “in a series of letters between a British couple, Richard Griffith and Elizabeth Griffith, prior to their marriage in 1751, published in 1770,” which, unfortunately, do not clarify its current meaning (Martin 2024).

An independent French researcher Pascal Tréguer traced the earliest citation of the proverb to a 1721 publication *The Apothecary’s Defence of Dr. Bentley, in Answer to the Spy. Together with some Observations, Moral and Critical, upon the Fable of the Jackdaw in Peacock’s Feathers; Particularly address’d to the Author of the Spy* (Tréguer 2021).

Speaking about linguistic (and also semantic) companions of the dictum *Boys will be boys*, it is worthwhile to mention that *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* links the proverb to the quotation “Youth will be youthful (when you haue saide all that you can)” from *Plain Man’s Pathway to Heaven* by A. Dent 1601 (Speake 2015: 33). The dictum *Girls will be girls* is a bona fide proverb recorded in *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* and *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder et al. 1992: 251) with years 1826 and 1870-73 listed as the earliest references respectively. The meaning ascribed to the saying in *The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* is analogous to that of *Boys will be boys* (Speake 2015: 33).

In contrast to *Boys will be boys*, there is certain “somber silence” accompanying the expression *Girls will be girls* (DG 2020) resulting in linguistic and also discursive asymmetry; while the former has been in active use, the latter has lacked cognitive and pragmatic salience. The following are the trends in the use of the two counterparts in printed materials (1800-2022) as reflected in Google Ngram Viewer graphs:

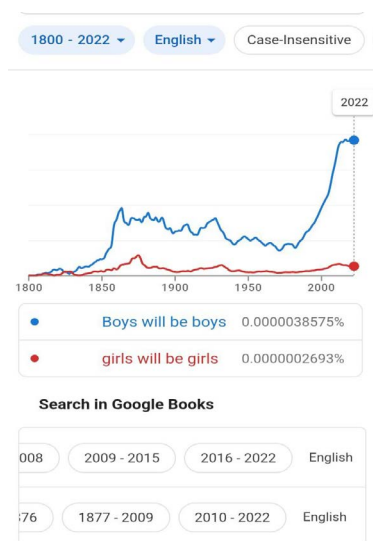


Figure 1. Frequency comparison of the proverbs *Boys will be boys* and *Girls will be girls* from 1800 to 2022. Chart generated by Google Books Ngram Viewer, books.google.com/ngrams, screenshot captured by author on 30 Dec 2025.

In light of the discursive performance of the phrase *Boys will be boys*, the proverb *Boys (Lads) will be men* documented in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (1949) with its first known citation dating back to 1641, is of particular interest as well (Smith 1949). As will be demonstrated further, *Boys will be men* has recently been deployed in discourse as an anti-proverb rather than a proverb per se.

4.2. Cognitive profile of the proverb

This section should be prefaced with the caveat that the distinction between the cognitive and discursive profiles is rather nominal and is necessitated by the aims of the present study. As has been noted earlier, from a cognitive standpoint, proverbs are mental structures or linguistic symbols representing recurrent life situations. Therefore, it can be argued that cognitive profiling of proverbs is fundamental for their case studies bearing in mind that their cognitive characteristics and function reveal themselves in their actual use in discourse, i.e. the environment wherein ideas and practices that shape meaning occur.

The following analysis adopts the term “cognitive-discursive valence” of the proverb implying its polysemanticity (several distinct “semantic vectors”) and the structural-semantic modifications observed in discourse. From the cognitive perspective, *Boys will be boys* has morphed into “a paremiological matryoshka doll” revealing previously implicit or euphemized meanings attached to this phrase in the mentality of some social actors. The following semantic vectors constituting its valence are:

- *Boys will be boys* as a social and cognitive construct, i.e. solid stereotype, a pillar of the patriarchal society and mindset.
- *Boys will be boys* as a stigma, i.e. a gendered phrase perpetuating harmful mentality, distorting the concept of masculinity, and, thus, creating gendered expectations.
- *Boys will be boys* as a speech formula, i.e. a pervasive statement with an exculpatory function.
- *Boys will be boys* as a marker of shifts in social norms and a catalyst for change.

4.3. *Discursive profile of the proverb*

The cognitive profile of the proverb *Boys will be boys* provides the prerequisites for its recent discursive currency and performance. From a structural-semantic point of view, all the examples in the empirical material can be subdivided into canonical (non-modified) and modified texts. The semantic vectors enumerated above are represented by both types.

As the analysis has revealed, cases of structural-semantic modification are rather scarce (which stands in opposition to the discursive trend of another ubiquitous gendered proverb *A woman's place is in the home*) (Konstantinova 2023). The dictum *Boys will be boys* is predominantly applied as a solid stereotype or speech formula.

4.3.1. *Boys will be boys* as a social and mental construct

A number of books, well-argued essays, articles, and posts stress that it is a deeply rooted stereotype with multiple facets (Brandt 2016; Faulkner 2019; DG 2020).

Some examples underscore *Boys will be boys* as a pillar of patriarchal society and mindset. In the following simplistic yet powerful posts, the concepts of patriarchy and masculinity are explained in several emblematic lines, including the dictum in question:

(1)



Figure 2. Intersectional Memes and Feminist Dreams. "Patriarchy Also Known As." *Facebook*, 28 July, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1L9NEkfStn/>, retrieved on 13 Sept. 2025. Repost of @NeoBaepii.

(2)



Figure 3. Daphni Claire. "When does a man reach the magical age of being totally accountable for his actions?" *Facebook*, 15 May, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1ELHmacbn1/>, retrieved on 13 Sept. 2025.

4.3.2. *Boys will be boys* as a stigma

Another discourse surrounding the proverb follows the semantic vector *Boys will be boys* as a stigma, and is based on the belief that it perpetuates a harmful stereotype (Figure 2), and is indicative of a double standard, i.e. it justifies more severe standards of behavior applied to women than to men (Figure 3).

Authors argue that the phrase *Boys will be boys* imposes a regulatory script rather than acknowledging men's individuality (Schiller 2019). Furthermore, this "arbitrary definition" of masculinity is inherently damaging; it sustains a social framework wherein boys who deviate from these norms are labeled abnormal ("Why 'Boys Will Be Boys' but Not 'Girls Will Be Girls?'" 2018).

Australian feminist author Clementine Ford in her book *Boys Will Be Boys: Power, Patriarchy and the Toxic Bonds of Masculinity* supports the latter view noting that such a mindset traps men in a narrow definition of masculinity which punishes vulnerability (Ford 2018). Drawing on psychological research, Smith discusses the deep-seated misogynistic blind spots within "boys will be boys" culture, noting that "innocently naughty behavior" has historically been regarded as a male prerogative. This double standard suggests that while boys have always been granted the "entitlement to experimentation and innocent risk-taking," girls have been denied such societal leniency (Smith 2018).

4.3.3. *Boys will be boys* as an exculpatory speech formula

As the analysis of the material suggests, the pervasiveness of men's misconduct towards women masks its harmful impact and frequently leads to its normalization in society. The dictum *Boys will be boys*, therefore, frequently serves as a ready-made argument to absolve the male population of "youthful indiscretions" and, consequently, prevents society from improving. The pragmatic scope of the dictum within this semantic vector includes

- an excuse for benign male mischief.

Online communities have shared narratives focusing on the silly or mischievous aspect of men's interactions and conduct featuring the proverb. In a social media post, for instance, a netizen leaning on the "woke-broke" opposition offers some socially appropriate uses of the proverb:

(3)



Figure 4. goosegoblin (formerly known as doomsneigh). “Broke: using ‘boys will be boys’ to defend abusive and predatory behaviour...” *Reddit*, 25 Oct. 2019, reddit.com, retrieved on 14 Oct. 2025.

- Sexual violence normalization.

Within this framework, the proverb serves as a rhetorical tool to neutralize harassment or bullying and minimize the gravity of an offense. In the gathered collection of examples, of special interest is a set of Internet memes involving legal context and referring directly or implicitly to adverse rulings in sexual harassment cases (including the allegations raised during the Associate Justice confirmation hearing of Brett Kavanaugh, Figure 5):

(4)



Figure 5. u/i_am_the_walrus_1984. “Boys Will Be Boys.” *Reddit*, 23 Sept. 2018, www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalHumor/comments/9i24xp/boys_will_be_boys/, retrieved on 14 Oct. 2025.

(5)



Figure 6. “The Parent Rap.” The Simpsons, season 13, episode 2, 20th Century Fox, 2001. *YARN*, [taylor.getyarn.io/yarn-clip/f2bbd0ee-e61d-4f1c-aa02-23a3a1ae4a3d/gif](https://yarn.getyarn.io/yarn-clip/f2bbd0ee-e61d-4f1c-aa02-23a3a1ae4a3d/gif), screenshot captured by author on 30 March 2025.

(6)



Figure 7. Saul Goodman “Your Honor, My Clients Pleads, Boys Will Be Boys” image macro. *Imgflip*, uploaded by uploader3215273, May 2022, imgflip.com/i/6g3ee3, retrieved on 30 March 2025.

A chilling real-life instance of the proverb deployment in a criminal context emerged during the 2017 court trial for the brutal rape and murder of Aboriginal woman Lynette Daley. One of the defendants, Adrian Attwater, explained the events to the police stating: (7) “*These things happen ... girls will be girls, boys will be boys*” (Williams 2017).

- The Trump extension and the *Trump will be Trump* corollary.

The proverb *Boys will be boys* has been widely deployed by the media, political commentators, online essayists, bloggers, and members of Donald Trump’s inner circle as a discursive tool to rationalize his conduct and minimize its impact. This exculpatory rhetoric gained significant prominence during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign in the wake of the release of the 2005 *Access Hollywood* recording.

Trump's critics argued that the descriptions of his treatment of women heard on the tape constituted an admission of sexual assault. He himself and his proponents utilized the related phrase "a locker room talk", framing such behavior as an inherent by-product of masculine nature, to mitigate the political and ethical repercussions of the recording.

To oppose such narrative media outlets and the online community held a united front categorizing it as a typical "boys will be boys" dismissal. For instance, in her article for *Time Magazine* "How Donald Trump Turned 2016 into a Referendum on Gender" Charlotte Alter noted that Trump's defense of (8) "*locker-room banter*" was "*essentially a 'boys will be boys' argument*" (Alter 2016).

A number of texts from the empirical material all featuring the analyzed proverb can be quoted here to demonstrate the vigorous counter-response of the digital community highlighting the danger of the "boys will be boys" mentality. For instance, on October 10, 2016 Sara K. Ahmed tweeted, (9) "*'Locker room talk' is the same 'boys will be boys' rhetoric that perpetuates and condones sexual assault. We are better than this. #debate*" or another netizen named Lex wrote, (10) "*Locker room talk*" = *Boys will be boys* = *men don't need to be held accountable for their sexist actions*" (qtd. in Rees).

More recently, the phrase under consideration was officially deployed by the White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt to rationalize the feud between two top advisers in the Trump administration – Elon Musk and Peter Navarro – which involved a series of personal insults. In April 2025, when asked if the escalating conflict was confusing the public or sending the wrong message, she responded: (11) "*No. Look, these are obviously two individuals who have very different views on trade and on tariffs. **Boys will be boys**, and we will let their public sparring continue. And you guys should all be very grateful that we have the most transparent administration in history*" (Korte 2025).

Given that Donald Trump's conduct has notoriously been described by this idiom, his persona serves as a textbook case for the proverb in online essays and reports, with the anti-proverb *Trump will be Trump* (occasionally *Trump gonna Trump* (cf. *Haters gonna hate*)) being its corollary. Two opposing tendencies in

the use of the anti-proverb can be distinguished in the collected material, with the negative assessment prevailing:

- negative assessment

For instance, in a critique of the Republican party's culture, a 2024 publication for *The American Prospect* linked the original and the recycled versions of the phrase: (12) "**Boys will be boys and Trump will be Trump** – a malevolent deranged geezer for all to see" (Meyerson 2024). A 2020 article for *Los Angeles Review of Books* quotes the American author and filmmaker Chris Whipple as saying that Trump "*clearly has no idea how to govern*," and regardless of his chiefs of staff, (13) "*Trump will be Trump*" (Rohde 2020).

- Positive assessment to describe Trump's "unique voice", immunity to traditional "vetting", following "his gut".

For instance, an article for *New York Amsterdam News* features the anti-proverb in its title (14) "*Bannon or no Bannon, **Trump will be Trump***" and conveys the idea that President's instinct-driven leadership is what his supporters value as a sign of strength (Collinson, 2017).

4.4.4. *Boys will be boys* as a marker of shifts in social norms and a catalyst for change

This actional dimension of the proverb can be observed in social media posts and publications decoupling masculinity from inherent harm and instead linking this phrase with men's prosocial behaviors and empathetic bonding as in the following examples:

(15)



Figure 8. *Boys will be boys* proverb variation, excerpted from Ally Perry, “The Best Heartwarming Wholesome Memes and Posts of the Week (June 12, 2025),” *Memebase, Cheezburger*, 12 June 2025, cheezburger.com/40999685/the-best-heartwarmingly-wholesome-memes-and-posts-of-the-week-june-12-2025. Meme 4, screenshot captured by author on 30 March 2025.

(16)



Figure 9. *Boys will be boys* reinterpretation thread. *Reddit, r/lotrmemes*, 22 Dec. 2020, www.reddit.com/r/lotrmemes/comments/khrngc/boys_will_be_boys/, screenshot captured by author on 30 March 2025.

Within the ongoing *nature vs nurture* debate, some texts reveal a persistent tendency to link the “boys will be boys” mentality to specific parenting methods and stress the idea of changing the stereotype through upbringing, classroom education, and the arts.

Another shift in the social norms *marked* by the proverb is connected with the polemic surrounding the concept of gender fluidity. This is the only set of multi-modal examples relying

mainly on the visual element to neutralize the controversy and leave the intended audience to deduce the meaning on their own, as in the following cartoon (Figure 10):

(17)



Figure 10. Mark Knight, *Boys Will Be Boys* sports cartoon. *Knight Cartoons*, knightcartoons.com.au/products/boys-will-be-boys-sports-cartoon, screenshot captured by author, 30 March 2025.

The 2020 single “Boys Will Be Boys” by the British pop artist Dua Lipa has been hailed as a feminist anthem for its incisive critique of gendered expectations. The track’s central anti-proverbial hook – (18) “*Boys will be boys, but girls will be women*” – highlights the double standard identified earlier: while boys are granted extended cultural forbearance for their behavior, girls are compelled to mature rapidly to navigate the world around them.

Pop mogul Taylor Swift has lent her voice to sociopolitical issues on several occasions as well. Her hit song “Miss Americana & the Heartbreak Prince” (2019) can be considered a sociopolitical commentary since it employs familiar high school imagery as a deliberate metaphor to express the singer’s disillusionment with the contemporary American political landscape. This feeling of helplessness is fuelled by the lack of wise leadership critiqued in the following lyric: (19) “*My team is losing, battered and bruising: / I see the high fives between the bad guys / ... / American stories burning before me / I’m feeling helpless, the damsels are depressed / **Boys will be boys then, where are the wise men?***”

The anti-proverb featured in the song can also be seen as an actional text and interpreted as a call to the political opposition (“wise men”) to find their voice and bring about change. In 2018, the Australian sleepwear brand Peter Alexander responded to public pressure by withdrawing a children’s sweatshirt from its shops following a backlash. The item, which featured the (20) “*Boys will be boys*” slogan, was pulled after a concerned mother’s protest against the “sexist statement” sparked a larger conversation about the controversial idioms incorporated in children’s fashion (Buttigieg 2018).

(21) Gillette’s 2019 “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be” commercial openly challenged the dismissive cliché *Boys will be boys* (uttered in the opening scene of the video). This much-publicized socially oriented campaign critiqued the culture of “toxic masculinity” and attacked the proverbial “rhetorical shield” that has long provided men with an excuse for grave transgressions (“We Believe”).

Perhaps the most culturally significant use of an anti-proverb derived from *Boys will be boys* is linked to the 2017 Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse scandal:

(22)



Figure 11. Shannon Downey, *Boys Will Be Boys* embroidery, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Shannon Downey / @badasscrossstitch, featured in Elise Taylor, “How That ‘Boys Will Be Boys’ Embroidery Became the Internet’s Response to Harvey Weinstein,” *Vogue*, 16 Oct. 2017, www.vogue.com/article/boys-will-be-boys-badass-crossstitch-harvey-weinstein, retrieved on 15 Oct. 2024.

Originally stitched by craftivist Shannon Downey in 2016 as a direct emotional response to the public outrage following the release of the above-mentioned *Access Hollywood* tape, the “*Boys will be boys*” embroidery achieved viral dissemination due to its extensive reposting by famous actresses and millions of social media users, which cemented its status of the emblem of collective protest. The anti-proverb *Boys will be held accountable for their actions* prescribes a new model of masculine conduct. Sh. Downey’s substitution of the lexeme “boys” was inspired by a phrase once spoken by her mother, who was determined to hold her sons accountable for their transgressions (Taylor 2017). The original insertion of the expletive (though often omitted from the slogan) was intended to channel her anger and frustration.

4.4.5. Anti-proverbial recycling of the proverb *Boys will be boys*

A special group of retooled versions of the proverb under study consists of 25 anti-proverbs, i.e. deliberate, innovative transformations of traditional paremias aimed at creating a humorous or satirical effect. Furthermore, these semantic and pragmatic twists achieved through the use of various linguistic modification devices and techniques challenge traditional worldviews and adapt them to modern contexts. Anti-proverbs have been extensively studied on the material of a slew of world languages (see, e.g., Mieder 1983; Mieder 2003; Raji-Oyelade 2024; T. Litovkina 2015; T. Litovkina et al. 2021).

The constant emergence and ubiquitous presence of proverbs across diverse discourses underscore their role in reflecting our “gravest concerns... and our most precious values” (Lau et al. 2004:1; Konstantinova 2021: 366). However, in the realm of sociopolitical activism, the *anti-proverbial genre* has proven to be an equally vigorous, and perhaps more impactful, linguistic instrument. It can be argued that by poignantly questioning traditional beliefs anti-proverbs subvert deeply-rooted stereotypes and reshape attitudes, thus becoming a catalyst for change.

Listed below are the anti-proverbs from the collected material which represent all of the semantic vectors discussed earlier¹:

¹ This list can serve as an addendum to the one presented in Mieder and T. Litovkina 1999.

- a social/mental construct, stigma, and exculpatory speech formula:

(23) *Boys will be boys, and so will a lot of middle-aged men*²

(24) *Boys will be boys because they can't be men. Amen*

(12 – 14) *Trump will be Trump*

(25) *Boys will be boys and girls will be blamed*

(18) *Boys will be boys but girls will be women;*

- a marker of shifts in social norms and a catalyst for change. The texts here explore the concept of gender fluidity:

(17) *Boys will be boys except when they choose to identify as girls*

(26) *Girls will be boys and boys will be girls. It's a mixed up, muddled up, shook world*

(27) *Boys will be boys even when they are destroying girls' records*

(28) *Boys will be boys? Correct. Gender is not a variable;*

underscore the importance of upbringing and education:

(29) *Boys will be boys until someone teaches them to be more*

(30) *Boys will be boys but parents will be turds*

(31) *Boys will be what they are taught*

(32) *Boys will be boys basically means bad parenting creates assholes;*

underpin men's inherent good traits:

(33) *Boys will be respectful*

(34) *Boys will be good humans*

(35) *Boys will be men*

(36) *Boys will be boys then where are the wise men?*

(37) *Boys will be best bros*

(38) *Boys will be boys?;*

frame men as women's supporters and allies:

(39) *Boys will be feminists*

(40) *Boys will be feminists, activists, and allies;*

² This anti-proverb is the only one also registered in the 1999 collection (Mieder and T. Litovkina 1999: 55).

introduce new mandates for accountability (pointing out the existing double standard):

(41) *Boys will be held accountable for their actions*

(42) *Boys will be held accountable for their actions just like girls/like everyone*

(43) *If boys will be boys, then girls are allowed to be angry*

(44) *Boys will be boys but you're getting too old to use this excuse.*

As the analysis of the anti-proverbs reveals, most of them are genuine “anti-texts”. For instance, *Boys will be boys because they can't be men. Amen*, with its sarcastic tag, the rhetorical *Boys will be boys then where are the wise men?* or the incisive *Boys will be boys even when they are destroying girls' records* are mere parodies of the traditional stereotype giving it a new twist or introducing substantive changes by imitating the original phrasing. *Boys will be held accountable for their actions*, *Boys will be held accountable for their actions just like girls/like everyone*, *Boys will be boys but girls will be women*, and *Trump will be Trump*, on the other hand, can be classified as “proverbs in the making” since they are endowed with greater semantic vigor and pragmatic prowess to become bona fide proverbs in the current propitious sociopolitical environment.

5. Discussion of the results

The comprehensive cognitive-discursive analysis of the proverb *Boys will be boys* and its anti-proverbial derivations has demonstrated their profound impact on the social fabric. The linguistic profile has traced the possible etymological connections of the proverb and examined its semantic companion *Girls will be girls* noting a conspicuous linguistic and (also discursive) asymmetry between the two counterparts. It has validated that *Boys will be boys* is a gendered phrase encapsulating a deeply entrenched social stereotype; it is characterized by discursive ambiguity.

The cognitive profiling of the dictum has unveiled its cognitive-discursive valence and delineated the following four semantic vectors: *Boys will be boys* as 1) a social and cognitive construct; 2) a stigma; 3) a speech formula; 4) a marker of shifts in social norms and a catalyst for change.

The analysis of its discursive profile following the distinguished sematic vectors has demonstrated that the cases of structural-semantic modification of the proverb are relatively infrequent (present only in the form of anti-proverbs). *Boys will be boys* is predominantly applied as a solid stereotype (“social/mental construct” vector) or as an exculpatory speech formula, providing a speaker with the illusory authority to rationalize socially unacceptable behavior, thus being involved in what has been described as “proverbsplaining”.

The “speech formula” vector reveals an extensive pragmatic scope, including uses ranging from the excuse for benign male mischief to normalization of sexual violence and, quite recently, as a characterization of the conduct of Donald Trump and the members of his inner circle.

The “marker of shifts in social norms and a catalyst for change” vector best manifests the actional potential of the proverb and includes “proverb in-action” instances of effectuating change through parenting and education, pop culture, popular brands’ strong social commentary or socially oriented advertising campaigns, and sociopolitical activism.

All the instances of non-canonical discursive use of the proverb *Boys will be boys* include anti-proverbial alterations. 25 anti-proverbs were identified in the empirical material with four sayings (*Boys will be held accountable for their actions*, *Boys will be held accountable for their actions just like girls/like everyone*, *Boys will be boys but girls will be women*, *Trump will be Trump*) possessing the linguistic and cognitive pre-requisites for becoming bona fide proverbs in the future. The conspicuous absence of light humor or playful jokes in the collected texts can be accounted for by the collective (and personal) significance of the problem.

These incisive anti-proverbs fulfill the metalinguistic function by explicating the concept of gender fluidity, underpinning the significance of the upbringing and education of boys, and introducing new mandates for accountability (pointing out the existing double standard applied to women). A newer dimension of the metalinguistic function is connected with the robust counter-critique response of the online community seeking to reclaim

the positive connotations of the adage by highlighting men's inherent good traits and establishing their status as women's allies.

Thus, the three profiles of the proverb *Boys will be boys* corroborate the proposition that, although the gender asymmetry is deeply rooted in the mentality, language consistently captures and marks all the fluctuations, shifts, and revolutionary acts, and serves as the catalyst for change.

6. Conclusion

Given that discourse is largely interpreted in terms of cognitive frames or mental representations, this research serves as a further substantiation of the tenet that phraseology in general, and proverbs in particular, provide fertile ground for this line of inquiry; they are instrumental to the discourses surrounding pressing sociopolitical problems including the issue of gender inequality.

The findings prove that being stereotypical in nature gender biased language limits one's understanding of the human experience. Furthermore, they suggest that the behaviors of social actors are product of discourse. As has been shown, recent discursive and, consequently, social shifts have led to a systematic deconstruction of the "boys will be boys" stereotype, aiming to marginalize its use in the collective consciousness and common parlance. Conversely, while the consensus holds that *Boys will be boys* is a dangerous phrase, there has also been a strong cultural impulse to reconsider the stereotype in a positive light. One must conclude, that the actualization of social change requires a comprehension of the existing social scripts that dictate patterns of human behavior (frequently contained in paremiological lore) and an appreciation of the complexity of these patterns and the shifts within them. Therefore, it is my belief, that the "discourse-gender-proverb" triad will remain a compelling site for future inquiry.

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