

Black English in the Movie *8 Mile*

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In this short presentation we will cover a couple of the aspects of Black English (BE) that came up in the movie *8 Mile* (2002). The presentation consists of a short introduction and history of BE, some examples of its generic use, and a look at the vocabulary. In addition, the film and its setting, Detroit, Michigan, will be quickly introduced. It is useful, though, to bear in mind that all that is said in this paper about BE goes back to *8 Mile* only. BE is obviously much more extensive in its use in real life than a single movie could ever represent it, and we have merely scratched the wide surface of this subject.

The Movie in short

The film describes a week taken out of the life of Jimmy "B-Rabbit" Smith Junior (Eminem), a white wannabe rap-star living in Detroit, Michigan. A glamorous career of a rap artist looms in Rabbit's mind, but the dream seems almost impossible to catch. Rabbit is struggling in almost every aspect of his life; a break-up with his pregnant girlfriend, moving back to his alcoholic mother's trailer, poor jobs and ending up mugged by an enemy gang are just some of the many hardships that Rabbit is to face during his way up.

Detroit in a nutshell

Following is a quick glance to the setting of the movie. The story takes place in the eleventh biggest city (with 886,671 residents) of the United States, Detroit, Michigan. Detroit is famous for, to have one example, its automotive industry, and thus is often referred to as Motor City or Motown. Struggling economy and poverty are also something fairly often associated to the city.

The name of the movie, *8 Mile*, is an actual road in Detroit. It is generally considered to form the boundary between black and white, poor and wealthier Detroit. In 2001 over 81% of the city residents were African-American of origin and some 12% were white. In the movie, B-Rabbit lives "on the wrong side of 8 Mile", and spends his time with his gang most of whom are black.

Brief history of Black English

Black English is the creation of black Diaspora. During the slavery time in U.S. African slaves from different tribes could not speak nor understand the other's language. So they developed what are called pidgins, simplified mixtures of two or more languages.

Nowadays the term Black English usually refers to the everyday spoken varieties of English used by African Americans, especially of the working class in urban neighbourhoods or rural communities. Black English is also known as

Ebonics. This name was invented in 1973 by Robert R. Williams, an African American professor of psychology at Washington University in Saint Louis. Williams fashioned the term Ebonics by combining ebony (for "black") and phonics (for "the scientific study of speech sounds") and used Ebonics to identify the variety of English spoken by many black Americans as a language or at least a dialect of its own rather than merely "bad" English. It shares many characteristics with various Creole English dialects spoken by black people in much of the world. Black English also has pronunciation, grammatical structures, and vocabulary in common with various West African languages. The formal recognition of Black English was revisited when a resolution from the Oakland, California school board on December 18, 1996, wanted "Ebonics" officially recognized as a language or a dialect.

An American writer Claude Brown called Black English a "Spoken Soul". Another writer Toni Morrison said, "It's a love, a passion. Its function is like a preacher's: to make you stand out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language".

Black English is also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), African American English, Black Vernacular, Black English Vernacular (BEV), and Black Vernacular English (BVE).

The language in the movie

1) Vocabulary

Next come some examples of the names black people use while talking to each other. Some names used especially to express friendship and acceptance and a couple of terms used to address rather unwanted people.

'Nigga', 'dawg', 'dude' and 'man' are positive in their meaning.

'Faggot', 'nigga' and 'wigger' can have (depending on their context) more or less negative associations.

A quite interesting way of creating new words came up in *8 Mile* in several points. It seems that combining the suffix -ass with almost every word one can imagine is an infinitive source of new words with differing meanings or tones. Here are some examples picked up from the movie:

Slow-ass ride

Corny-ass rap

Junky-ass basement

Punk-ass bitch

Nasty-ass food, nasty-ass mood

Stupid-ass niggas

White-ass rap
Fake-ass Big Willie wannabe talk

2) Verb structures

Negation:

'Ain't' is used as a general negation instead of 'isn't', 'aren't', 'don't', and 'am not'.

- *We ain't got all day*

Omission of 'be':

The different forms of the verb 'to be' are often just simply dropped.

- *Why you up so early?*
- *You coming or what?*
- *You feeling all right?*
- *The dude mentally ill?*

Omission of 'have':

In the perfect tense, the word 'have' in all its forms is often dropped.

- *You just seen me*
- *I been busy*

Plural instead of singular:

Plural verb forms are often used with singular subjects.

- *He don't like pussy*
- *Nobody care about that shit*

Singular instead of plural:

Conversely, singular verb forms are sometimes used with plural subjects.

- *You bitches is wack*

Singular second-person forms:

The verb forms that are in the singular second-person tend to behave as the forms in singular first person ('is' instead of 'are', 'was' instead of 'were')

- *You was late today*
- *Did you find the guy you was looking for?*
- *Who the fuck is you?*
- *What is you looking at?*