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The black vernacular versus a cracker's knack for verses

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The Black Vernacular Versus a Cracker's Knack for Verses

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Who would have ever thought that one of the greatest rappers of all would be a white cat?
—Ice-T, *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap*[1]

Slim Shady's psychopathy is worthy of a good slasher movie. The sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics behind Marshall Mathers and his music, though, are deserving of a PBS documentary. Eminem capitalizes on his linguistic genie with as much savvy as he does on his alter egos. He "flips the linguistics," as he boasts in "Fast Lane" from Bad Meets Evil's 2011 album *Hell: The Sequel.*

As its title suggests, this essay focuses initially on the fact that rap is deeply rooted in black English, relating this to Eminem in the context of much information on the language of (Detroit) blacks. This linguistic excursion may not endear me to readers who hate grammar (or to impatient fans), but it ultimately helps to understand how Eminem and hip hop managed to adopt each other. The second part of the essay focuses on Eminem's craft. My take is novel, I think, though some fans may find themselves reading what they already know. That's actually my aim: to make explicit some of what fans know (and love) implicitly. The idea is to contribute to an understanding of how and why Eminem's music is appreciated.

Eminem Sociolinguistics: An Intro

The intro to "Above The Law" on *Hell: The Sequel* brings up the gap between the rich and the poor: the former "get richer," Claret Jai sings pro-

verbially, while the latter "stays poor." Of special interest is that the Detroiter sings "stays" in the intro, but "stay" when she repeats the same line in the chorus. I can think of no better introduction than this to sociolinguistics. As one expert of this field, Sali Tagliamonte, remarks, "the use of verbal *-s* in contemporary standard English dialects … only occurs in third person singular. Why? Nobody knows for sure. That's just the way it is."[2] By contrast, in some of the colonial dialects that the early black slaves were exposed to, verbal *s* could optionally extend to other persons in the present-habitual ("I/you/we/they smokes").[3] As a consequence, verbal *-s* was possible in all persons in the vernacular of slaves and ex-slaves, and this usage persists to this day among many blacks in the South.

Let's now come back to Detroit, which black southerners flocked to during the Great Migration of the early twentieth century. Northern whites—even working-class ones—restrict *-s* to third-person singular verbs in "habitual" contexts ("I/you/we/they smoke," not "I/you/we/they smokes"). According to renowned sociolinguist Walt Wolfram, this restriction has spread to black English dialects in northern cities like Detroit:

> [T]here is a kind of dialect levelling in which traditional, localized Southern features may be reduced or lost. For example, in urban Northern AAVE [African American Vernacular English] there is no evidence of 3rd plural *-s* in *The dogs barks* even though this trait was a characteristic of some earlier regional varieties in the South.[4]

However, Jai's intro in "Above The Law" demonstrates that verbal *-s* still persists beyond the third-person singular in her Detroit dialect. As Wolfram's remark suggests, this timeworn pattern is rare—it is absent in black children, for instance[5]—so it is noteworthy that Eminem uses it on occasion. For example:

- "…that Nas and Jay does" ("Monkey See Monkey Do," *Straight from the Lab* bootleg)
- "I sprays the facts" ("The Re-Up," *Eminem Presents the Re-Up*)

Jai's intro-line also subtly points out that non-standard grammar is favored by the lower classes, who mostly "stays poor," whereas it is avoided by the upper classes, who "get rich" (not "gets rich"). This point can be emphasized by focusing on the use of verbal *-s* in third-person singular. Northern white American dialects not only restrict *-s* to third-person singular verbs in habitual contexts, as just mentioned, but also require it ("she smokes," not "she smoke"). In contrast, *-s* is frequently absent from third-person singular verbs in black English dialects ("she smoke a lot"). Importantly, in his landmark study of four dozen black Detroiters,[6] Walt Wolfram found

that verbal -*s* is absent at very different rates depending on social class. Working-class speakers omitted verbal -*s* at much higher rates (56.9–71.4 percent) than middle-class speakers (1.4–9.7 percent). The charts in Figure 1, adapted from Wolfram, illustrate this sharp social stratification. The first chart shows that the rate of -*s* absence varies according to age, too: younger speakers omit -*s* more often. The second chart additionally shows that the rate of -*s* absence varies according to gender: male speakers tend to omit -*s* more frequently.
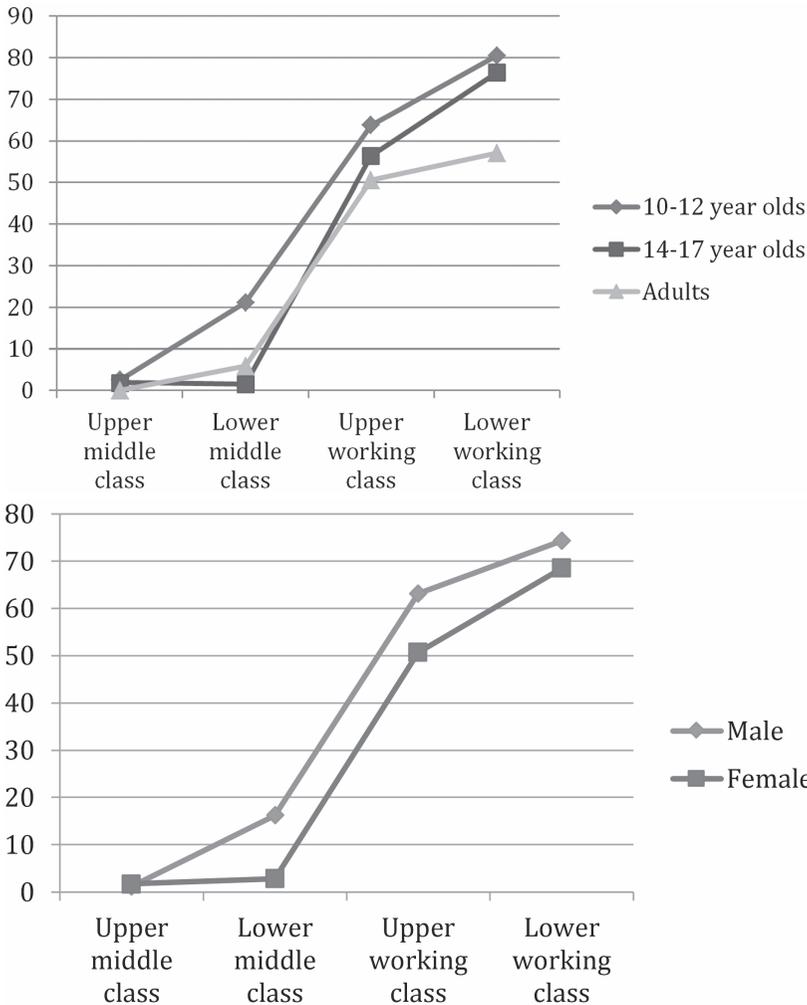

Figure 1. Percentage of *s* absence in third-person singular present indicative in the speech of Detroit blacks according to class.

Wolfram studied nine other distinguishing features of black English in Detroit and found them to pattern according to broad social categories in much the same way as verbal *-s* did. For instance, black English uniquely allows *is/are* (*'s/'re*) to be variably absent (e.g., "my dad funny," "we a family," "they singin'"). Wolfram again found that *is/are* absence occurred at very different rates depending on social class. Working-class speakers omitted *is/are* at considerably higher rates (37.3–56.9 percent) than middle-class
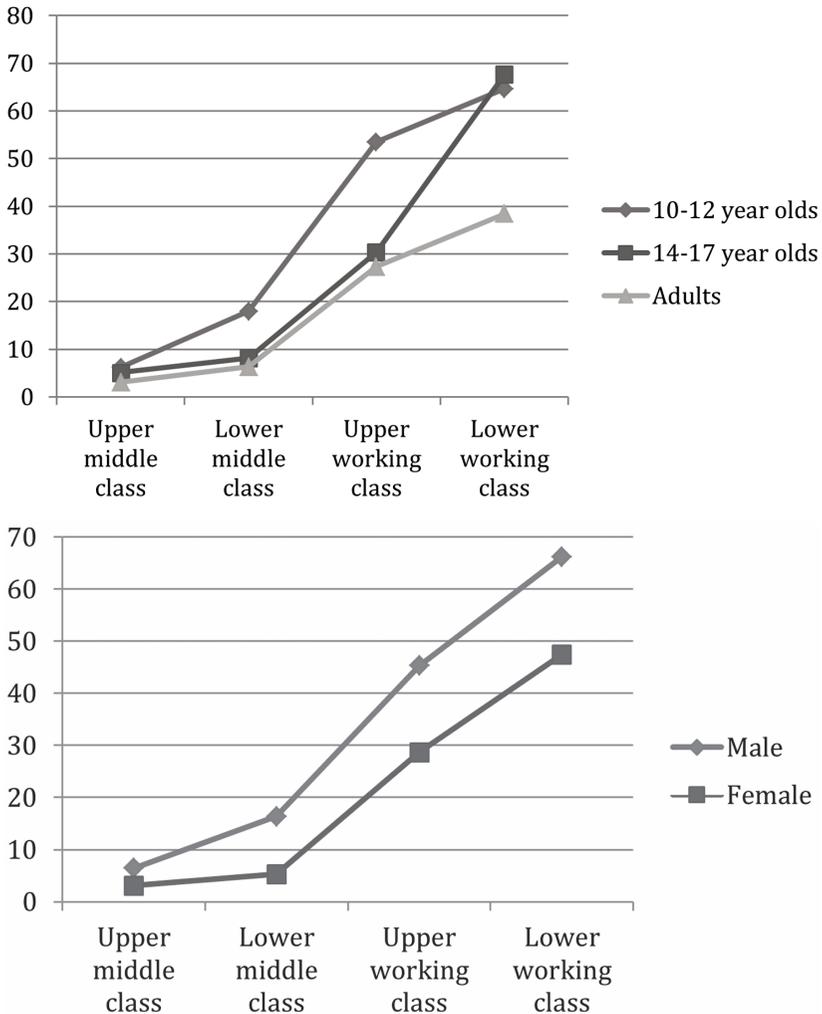

Figure 2. Percentage of *is/are* absence in the speech of Detroit blacks according to class as well as age (first chart) and gender (second chart).

speakers (4.7–10.9 percent). This sharp social stratification can be seen in the charts of Figure 2, adapted from Wolfram. The two charts also illustrate that younger speakers on the one hand, and males on the other, each omit *is/are* more frequently.

In short, Wolfram's study demonstrated that Detroiters usage of non-standard grammar reflects their social structure. However, most language behavior is not fixed within broad social categories like class, age, or gender. Rather, speakers tend to shift their speech style in different contexts. For instance, Wolfram found that working-class Detroiters omitted verbal *-s* and *is/are* at rather high rates during interviews. The latter were conducted in an informal atmosphere to record naturalistic conversation. The speech elicited is described as "not quite casual but not quite formal … the speech used by children to adults and adults to respected strangers … the style in which Americans make their moves up (or down) the social scale."[7] Crucially, the same working-class speakers omitted verbal *-s* and *is/are* at much lower rates when asked to read a couple of pages. The reading passage was a coherent narrative, focused on a conversation about a basketball game, but as a reading task, it elicited a more careful or formal style of speech. The dramatic rate changes are shown in Figure 3, adapted from Wolfram. Such large stylistic shifts suggest that verbal *-s* absence and *is/are* absence are both highly developed linguistic features of the black community in Detroit, and that speakers are consciously aware of them.

So what about the language of hip hop? What style is most appropriate for hip-hop artists to slip into, and do they do it? Rap music is aimed primarily at young urban working-class blacks, as John and Russell Rickford emphasize:
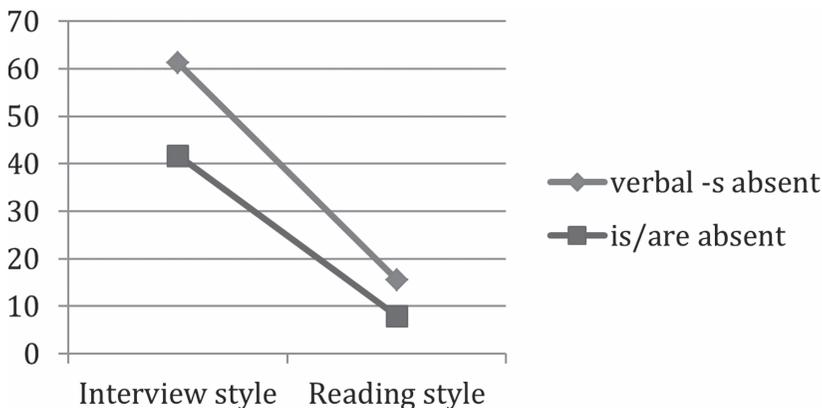

Figure 3. Percentage of verbal *-s* absence and *is/are* absence in the speech of working-class black Detroiters, by style.

There is no question that black talk provides hip-hop's linguistic underpin-nings.… What many hip-hop heads probably don't realize is that [an act like] Goodie Mob owes plenty to Spoken Soul [the Rickfords' loving term for black English]. Not just for sledgehammer lyrics and the style in which they're delivered, but for its coveted, noncommercial status within the industry. After all, the Mob is regarded as "real" and truthful because of its image of fierce nonconformity, and nothing thumbs its nose at conformity like the unrestrained African American vernacular. Although white subur-ban youngsters eat up hip-hop's edgy tales of money, sexual adventure, ghetto life, and racial injustice (and keep ghetto rhymes atop the pop charts), black urban youngsters are the genre's target audience. And black urban youngsters follow artists who roam the world implied by the neigh-borhood language of black urban youngsters.[8]

Moreover, some genres and subgenres (gangsta, hardcore, horrorcore) target males in particular. This is largely true of rap in general. As Adam Bradley states: "Rap music is a musical form made by young men and largely consumed by young men."[9] Altogether, then, it stands to reason that black MCs will not only omit verbal -s and is/are in their lyrics, but do so at very high rates, as per the charts above (Figs. 1–3).

Ideally, one would want to compare an MC's usage of black grammar in rap versus interviews, to monitor stylistic shifts. This is precisely what H. Samy Alim did with two black rappers: New Orleans's Juvenile, and Philadelphia's Eve. Alim first determined the overall rates of is/are absence in two albums: Juvenile's 1999 *That G-Code*, and Eve's 1999 *Let There Be Eve … Ruff Ryders' First Lady*. He then recorded interviews with each artist
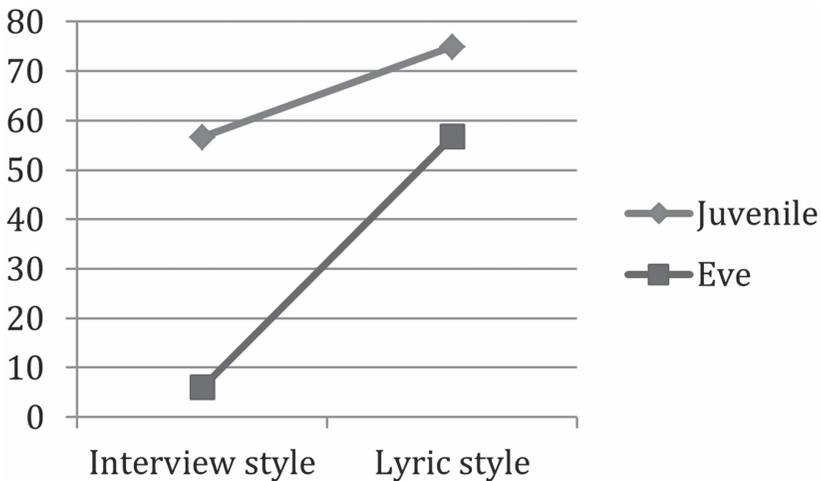

Figure 4. Percentage of is/are absence in the speech of Juvenile and Eve, by style.

in 2000 and determined the rates of *is/are* absence in those interviews. I've plotted the results of his study in Figure 4. As Alim states: "We see an increase in the frequency of absence … when moving from the interview data to the lyrical data…. So it is clear that both of these artists display the absent form more frequently in their lyrical data than in their interview speech data."[10]

Alim goes on to argue that rappers are conscious of *is/are* variation and use it to "stay street":

> Hip Hop artists assert their linguistic acts of identity in order to "represent" the streets. This may be viewed as a conscious, linguistic maneuver to connect with the streets as a space of culture, creativity, cognition, and consciousness. If we view Hip Hop artists as social interactants communicating with members of the Black American Street Culture, [*is/are*] variation appears to be conscious—street-conscious (both cognitive and cultural). Hip Hop artists, by the very nature of their circumstances, are ultraconscious of their speech. As members of the [Hip Hop Nation], they exist in a cultural space where extraordinary attention is paid to speech. Speech is consciously varied toward the informal end of the continuum in order to maintain street credibility.[11]

But what about white hip-hoppers? Of the dozen white rappers in Cecelia Cutler's study *Crossing Over: White Teenagers, Hip Hop and African American English* only one displayed any kind of *is/are* absence in his everyday speech style. However, most displayed *is/are* absence while rapping, if only sporadically. For instance, Cutler reports that the late underground rapper Eyedea did not omit *is/are* in his everyday speech style, but did so a little in his performances.[12] In one rap battle, for example, he omitted *is/are* four times out of twenty-five (15 percent), as in "So why Ø you walkin'…?," where Ø indicates an absence. Emimem, too, omits *is/are* in his raps, but not especially frequently. Examples include:

- "some of us Ø cannibals" ("The Real Slim Shady," *The Marshall Mathers LP*)
- "while we Ø comin' out" ("Just Don't Give a Fuck," *The Slim Shady EP*)

In a study of fifteen songs, Julie Dougherty found that Eminem displays *is/are* absence at a rate of 16 percent (N=268).[13] This rate corresponds to the speech of lower middle-class black males in Wolfram's Detroit study (see Fig. 2), but MCs from this social class are expected to display much higher rates of *is/are* absence in their raps (see Fig. 4).

As for verbal *-s*, Eminem very rarely omits it in third-person singular. Here are some examples:

- "everybody wantØ to [wanna] run…" ("Marshall Mathers," *The Marshall Mathers LP*)
- "What difference it makeØ?" (Bad Meets Evil, "Lighters," *Hell: The Sequel*)

Eminem's systematic use of verbal –*s* in third-person singular is similar to what upper middle-class blacks did in Wolfram's study (see Fig. 1), but, again, it sharply distinguishes Eminem from his fellow MCs, who show high rates of –*s* absence in raps. Following are some easy-to-find examples from black MCs in songs with Eminem:

- "She keepØ a sugar daddy"—Royce da 5'9," from Detroit ("Rock City," *Rock City*)
- "…who wantØ to [wanna] die" —Xzibit, from Detroit ("Say My Name," *Man vs. Machine*)
- "she hearØ me" —Bobby Creekwater, from Atlanta ("Shake That," *Curtain Call*)

In sum, Eminem does not "overuse" black English grammar, in spite of being integrated into the black speech community. There may be several reasons for this. First, Cutler points out that white hip-hoppers must be cautious to avoid being labeled inauthentic "wannabe" blacks. For example, in the presentation of black English in the documentary *Voices of North Carolina*, Phonte introduces fellow rapper Joe Scudda:

Phonte: "Yes in hip hop we do have friends, and yes he is a white man. His name is Joe Scudda, and he freestyleØ too…"

Joe Scudda: "What Ø up? / I'm back on the grind again / still remindin' 'em / We Ø in the front where the line beginØ / You Ø in the back where the line goØ in."[14]

Observe how, in just a few bars, Scudda omits *is/are* three times, and verbal –*s* twice (Phonte also does once). I remember thinking, when I first saw the documentary, that Scudda was "overdoing authenticity." White rappers use black grammar because their adopted music genre is black, but most do so in moderation, because they are not trying to be black themselves. Eminem is outspoken about this, notably in "White America," but it is especially obvious from what he always leaves unspoken—the N-word, which his black peers use habitually.

Cutler suggests that white hip-hoppers may also avoid overusing black English because normally they do not have native-like control of its grammar. But this is not true of Eminem. Virtually all grammatical features that are unique to black English in Detroit[15] are found in Eminem's lyrics—in correct usage. Some examples have already been given—verbal –*s* absence

in third-person singular; verbal –*s* used in other persons; *is/are* absence. Another is so-called "remote" "been." When Eminem says "I been crazy" in "Forgot About Dre," his pronunciation and intended meaning are decidedly black: "been" is markedly stressed, and the sentence means that Eminem was crazy long ago, and still is. Crucially, if the same sentence were used in (non-standard) white English, "been" would not be stressed, and the meaning would also be quite different: Eminem was crazy, perhaps even recently, but he is no longer crazy.[16] Some other examples of Eminem's command of black English follow:

- "Completive" "done"; for example: "she done fed it" ("My Mom," *Relapse*); "they done had enough" ("Elevator," *Relapse: Refill*).
- Invariant "be": "they be actin' maniac" ("Infinite," *Infinite*); "they kids be listenin'" ("Sing for the Moment," *The Eminem Show*).
- "they" for "their"; for example: "they kids" ("Sing for the Moment," *The Eminem Show*); "they veins" ("I'm Shady, *The Slim Shady LP*).
- "ain't" used for "didn't"; for example: "I ain't have to graduate…" ("White America," *The Eminem Show*); "we ain't know" ("Yellow Brick Road," *Encore*).
- Double-negatives with verbs; for example: "Nobody couldn't see" ("Say Goodbye Hollywood, *The Eminem Show*); "Nobody don't care" (2Pac, Black Cotton," *Loyal to the Game*).
- Negative inversion (words inverted in negation); for example: "don't anyone know me" ("Sing for the Moment," *The Eminem Show*); "can't nothing compare" ("Fly Away," *Fly Away* single).
- "finna," an abbreviation for "fixin' to" that means "getting ready to"; for example: "We finna make this" ("Ballin' Uncontrollably," *Straight from the Vault EP*); "finna have a party" ("Shake That," *Curtain Call*).
- "I'mma" for "I'm gonna"; for example: "I'mma hit the cinema" ("Ballin' Uncontrollably," *Straight from the Vault EP*).
- Irregular verb forms; for example: "tooken" for "taken" ("Marshall Mathers," *The Marshall Mathers LP*); "drug" for "dragged" ("Kill You," *The Marshall Mathers LP*); "spitted" for "spat" (Bad Meets Evil, "Fast Lane," *Hell: The Sequel*).
- Discourse words/phrases: not just the usual suspects ("Yo," "Dawg," "You know what I'm sayin?," etc.), but lesser known ones like "son," a term used (paradoxically) for peers ("Infinite," *Infinite*; "Same Song & Dance," *Relapse*).

Another reason that Eminem doesn't overuse black grammar is that he doesn't need to. Alim claims that many MCs use black grammar to an exaggerated degree in order to maintain "street credibility." Instead, Eminem

has widely documented—in interviews, music, and film—that he grew up poor, developed authentic relationships in the black ghettos of Detroit, and battled his way to the top from rap's deep underground, with genuine talent. In Ice-T's documentary *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap*, Redman singles out Eminem as an MC who "been gained" his respect, and remarks: "He was in my hood before he blew up. He was in Newark, he was with the Outsidaz. So he been in the hood before he got on. So I think it always been in him." Eminem embodies the rags-to-riches American dream, of course, but many in the ghettos can still relate to him because (aside from passing references to his Benz) he doesn't overly flaunt his riches, unlike many rappers. Moreover, his tragedy-plagued life and his music remind fans that riches don't ensure bliss.

Though Eminem's ghetto-fandom is important, it is widely believed that most of his fans are middle-class whites. Jonathan Scott offers a warning in this connection:

> Mathers is a poor kid from industrial Detroit, not a middle-class bellettrist…. [I]n the context of Eminem criticism—which is becoming intense … white middle-class critics are attempting to claim Mathers as their own progeny, as yet another great white poet of the great tradition of great white literature. We can forget about them for now, for Mathers himself would doubtless show them the middle finger if faced with their puerile ideas about his art…. To frame it differently … Marshall Mathers III [is] the first poet laureate of the white working class. And he is first precisely because he is the first white writer to speak on behalf of poor whites not through a white ethnic middle-class immigrant art form but rather through the popular-democratic tradition of Black folks.[17]

It is useful to relate Scott's point to Eminem's language. Below I offer a list of grammatical features that many would assume to be black English, and Eminem may well deploy them as such in his black-rooted music. But these are also linguistic features of Eminem's working-class white background, which he has talked, acted, and rapped about. So in these instances at least, Eminem is not just "talking black" ("Sing for the Moment," *The Eminem Show*); he is also speaking his native white tongue.

- "don't" used for "doesn't"; for example: "she don't understand" ("8 Mile," *8 Mile*); "shit don't phase me" ("Hailie's Song," *The Eminem Show*); "it don't matter" ("Lose Yourself," *8 Mile*).
- "Ain't" used for negative of "have" and "be"; for example: "you ain't seen it" ("The Kids," *The Marshall Mathers LP* [clean version]); "I ain't sniffed since…" (Bad Meets Evil, "Nuttin' to Do," *Nuttin' to Do / Scary Movie*); "My views ain't changed" ("Square Dance," *The Eminem Show*).

- Double/multiple negation; for example: "ain't got no tits!" ("My Name Is," *The Slim Shady LP*); "I ain't goin' nowhere" (" Hailie's Song," *The Eminem Show*); "ain't never met nobody" ("So Bad," *Recovery*).
- "is"/"was" used for "are"/"were"; for example: "how fucked up is you?" ("Stan," *The Marshall Mathers LP*); "they was like,…" ("Cum On Everybody," *The Slim Shady LP*); "you was a mom" ("Cleanin' Out My Closet," *The Eminem Show*).
- Past participle form used for preterit; for example: "I seen the porno" ("Guilty Conscience," *The Slim Shady LP*); "We been ridin' around" (Bad Meets Evil, "The Reunion," *Hell: The Sequel*); "They been waitin' patiently" ("Forever," *Relapse: Refill*).
- Preterit form used for past participle; for example: "I've went to jail" (" Hailie's Song, *The Eminem Show*); "you must have mistook me" ("Cold Wind Blows," *Recovery*); "I would've did anything" ("Space Bound," *Recovery*).
- Preterit form used for adjective; for example: "his ass was rotted" ("Can-I-Bitch," *Straight from the Lab*); "my head is swole" (Lil Wayne, "Drop The World," *Rebirth*); "some are wrote on a napkin" ("Almost Famous," *Recovery*).
- "Them" used for "those" (as determiner); for example: "them baffling acts" ("Tonite," *Infinite*); "them same friends" ("If I Had," *The Slim Shady LP*); "And them shits reach…" ("Remember Me?," *The Marshall Mathers LP*).
- Object pronouns used as subjects; for example: "Them's the people" ("Never 2 Far," *Infinite*); "Him don't give…" (Bad Meets Evil, "A Kiss," *Hell: The Sequel*). Object pronouns are especially common in conjoined subjects; for example: "Me and Hailie danced" ("Bump Heads," *The Singles*); "him and Jeff were still…" (DJ Jazzy Jeff, "When to Stand Up," *When to Stand Up*).
- Verb suffix *-ing* usually pronounced *-in'*; for example: "workin'," "playin'," etc.
- "all's" used for "all as," a working-class (and rural) variant of "all that"; for example: "all's we know" ("2.0 Boys," *2.0 Boys*).

Notwithstanding the above, it must be recognized that Eminem has a distinctly black accent (as he openly acknowledges in "The Way I Am," *Marshall Mathers LP*), in several ways. First, he often changes the "l" consonant to [o] (the GOAT vowel) at the ends of words or syllables. So for instance, "fatal" rhymes perfectly with "Play-Doh" in "Fly Away" (*Recovery*). This is a well-known pronunciation feature of black English. In white varieties of American English, the consonant "l" also acquires an [o]-like quality

at the ends of words and syllables, but it rarely changes completely into a vowel.

Second, Eminem frequently drops the "r" sound at the ends of words and syllables, in words like "car," "mother," "Morgan," or "barbecue." Wolfram's study of black Detroiters revealed that middle-class speakers dropped "r" in this way somewhat frequently (20.8–38.8 percent), and that working-class speakers did so even more frequently (61.3–71.7 percent). In her study of fifteen songs, Dougherty found that Eminem drops the "r" sound at the very high rate of 82.1 percent (N=285). This pronunciation pattern puts him in the same range as working-class black males in Wolfram's study. That is, as far as his (non-)pronunciation of "r" is concerned, Eminem has (or takes on) the accent of a working-class black man. This fact really stands out because all whites always pronounce their *r* sounds in Detroit (unlike in Boston or New York City).[18]

Third, Eminem's pronunciation of "hushing" sounds "sh," "zh," "ch," and "j" (as in "na*ti*on," "A*si*an," "lun*ch*," "bu*dge*," respectively) is sometimes closer to "hissing" sounds "s," "z," "ts," and "dz" (as in "na*s*cent," "dai*s*y," "Ri*tz*," "a*dze*," respectively). For instance, listen to the first verse of "Never 2 Far" (*Infinite*) and pay attention to how he pronounces "ri*ch* … i*tch*ed … fi*sh* … uncondi*ti*onally … ca*sh* … vi*si*on … mi*ssi*onless." Similarly, listen to "lun*ch* money … tea*ch*er, tea*ch*er … deten*ti*on" in the first verse of "Brain Damage" (*The Slim Shady LP*), or how he says "freedom of spee*ch*" in the intro to "White America" (*The Eminem Show*). This pronunciation pattern is not documented for black English (aside from a few words, like "shrimp" being pronounced "srimp"), but it seems somewhat common among black hip-hoppers, so I assume that Eminem adopted it from the latter. (Outside the hypermasculine hip-hop nation, this pronunciation pattern is sometimes described as sounding effeminate or gay.)

Finally, Eminem regularly pronounces the [aɪ] vowel in such words as "vibe," "high," and "time" as [aa] ("vahb," "hah," "tahm"). This pronunciation is widely associated with southern Americans as well as northern blacks. Like most blacks, Eminem tends to say [aɪ] (not [aa]) before voiceless consonants ("p," "f," "t," "s," "sh," "ch," and "k"). As a consequence, words like "tide" and "tight" do not have the same vowel for Eminem. So for instance, when he is composing a song during the bus-riding scene of *8 Mile*, he instinctively chooses words that end in voiceless consonants, to ensure that the last vowel remains constant as [aɪ] (not [aa]): "real life … kill mics … still white … hate life … brake lights … stage fright … blank like."

Interestingly, Eminem's retention of [aɪ] before voiceless consonants is conservative by Detroit standards. Bridget Anderson reports that most black Detroiters now pronounce [aɪ] as [aa] before voiceless consonant,
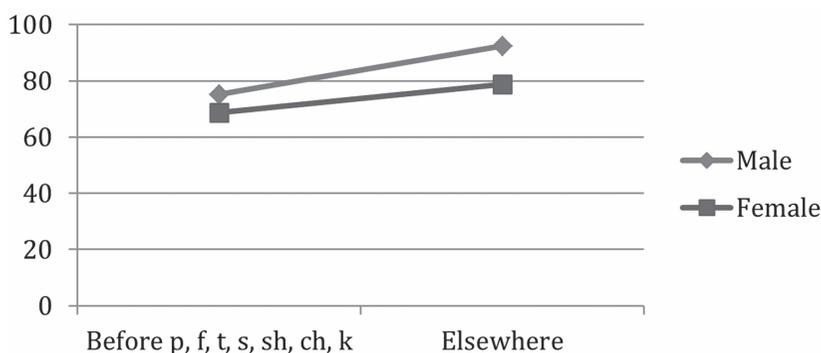
Figure 5. Percentage of [aɪ] pronounced as [aa] in the speech of black Detroiters, by gender and context.

almost as often as they do elsewhere, such that "tight" usually has the same vowel as "tide" (both with [aa]).[19] This is shown in Figure 5, adapted from Anderson.

According to Anderson, blacks adopted the [aa] pronunciation before voiceless consonants from white Appalachians who migrated to Detroit. Evidently, blacks felt an affinity with these working-class whites who, like them, were discriminated against, marginalized, and ultimately "left behind" in Detroit's inner city by other whites. This is the same kind of affinity, it seems, that brought black hip hop and Eminem together—so closely, in fact, that "the Caucasian of rap"[20] is able to tell his rivals, "kiss my black ass!"[21] while his mentor Dr. Dre tells resentful black MCs in particular, "you can kiss … the cracker's ass."[22]

Eminem Psycholinguistics: A Primer

Eminem proclaimed his mission statement in the very first line of the first verse of the first (and title) track of his debut album, *Infinite*, in 1996: to set off "chain reactions" in listeners' brains with his "pen and paper." A hundred million fans later, he can rightfully declare "mission accomplished." But just how did/does he accomplish it, really? The short answer is that Eminem *is* accomplished, period. About three hundred songs are powered by his unrelenting voice. But the question lingers and invites longer answers from different perspectives (hence this book). In this second part of this essay, I offer a one-word answer from psycholinguistics for Eminem's accomplishments: priming. *Priming* refers to a subconscious memory effect whereby one's response to a stimulus is influenced by prior exposure to another stimulus. Homophony is a good first example.

As most people know, a homophone (literally *homo-* "same" + *phone* "sound") is a word or phrase that sounds the same as another. Eminem is famously a homophone because Marshall Mathers realized early in life that M&M's chocolate candy could refer to him. The proper nouns in Slim Shady are also homophonous with adjectives. Homophones are common—representing over forty percent of English words, according to some dictionaries—and we ably use context to get around their ambiguity. However, psycholinguists have discovered that "appropriate and inappropriate meanings are both activated when we hear an ambiguous word…. [C]ontext does affect meaning selection eventually, even though it does not appear to prevent incorrect meanings from being activated in the first place."[23]

For instance, suppose we measure your brain's response to seeing a word on a computer screen after hearing a sentence. Your response to seeing "Hershey's" (as opposed to, say, "Levi's") may be faster after hearing the sentence "Only a few songs on this album are Eminem's." The sentence's influence on your response time is called a "priming effect." It suggests that the sentence-final word causes the meaning "M&M's"—and other chocolate candy by extension—to be activated in your subconscious brain in spite of the disambiguating context. (Similarly, you may respond faster to seeing the word "music" (as opposed to, say, "fashion") after hearing the sentence "Only a few candies in this bowl are M&M's.")

Eminem makes extensive and increasing use of priming and homophony. Specifically, his verses tend to sustain the ambiguity caused by a given homophone. The goal, as stated above, is for his pen and paper to cause chain reactions in our brains. It is not, as some misunderstand, only to make puns. For instance, Eminem's verse in Rihanna's "Numb" (*Unapologetic*) starts with "I'm plastered." The intended slang meaning that he's "high" is clear from Rihanna's preceding singing and it is verbalized in the next line. But the literal meaning related to plaster is also drawn out by a muffled voice that shouts "Drywall!" immediately after. Eminem then recycles the bar that he used to end-rhyme with "drywall" in his previous collaboration with Rihanna ("Love the Way You Lie," *Recovery*). He also uses a line from that song's hook in the next line of "Numb." Our memory carries over the original intents of these recycled bars into "Numb," but Eminem gives them additional meanings here, related to being high—namely, administering a drug test and lying about its result. None of this is meant to be funny, it seems. Eminem aims more directly to sustain simultaneous meanings that are activated in our brains by homophony and associated memories.

This is not to deny that Eminem often uses priming and homophony to convey humor, whether light (for example, "my wheels spoke to her" in Skylar Grey's "C'mon Let Me Ride," *Don't Look Down*) or dark (for example,

in "Mockingbird," *Encore*, he raps that he will make a jeweler eat every karat). He notoriously wields them to go Slim Shady on various people: his exes and other women, his rivals and others in the hip-hop industry, political figures and other talking heads, etc. Examples abound, but a current favorite comes from his electrifying verse in 50 Cent's "My Life": Shady silences his critics and gets them to see his way by tearing out their vocal cords, which he then uses to connect their eye sockets to electrical outlets. It's absurd, of course, but it makes sense in the listening moment because "cords" and "sockets" both prime "electricity," and vice versa.

Eminem is especially prone to priming literal meanings in fixed phrases or idioms (again, particularly in more recent songs). One notable example is the Christmas "fuck you" from *Recovery's* "Not Afraid" that makes a gift a curse. The first phrase primes a less idiomatic reading of the two homophones in the second phrase. He achieves a similar (priming) effect when he name-drops Michael Vick and David Carradine before using the idioms "sick puppy" ("Cold Wind Blows," *Recovery*) and "die hard" (Bad Meets Evil, "Welcome 2 Hell," *Hell: The Sequel*), respectively. In "Richard" (Obie Trice, *Bottoms Up*), he repeats a memorable hook line from "Lose Yourself" (*8 Mile*) but the preceding line of "Richard" newly injects sexual innuendo into its expressions ("only get one shot," "chance to blow"). In "Won't Back Down" (*Recovery*) the expression "turn me down" has its usual idiomatic meaning of rejection, but its literal meaning is also primed by a decrease in the song's volume at the end of the preceding line.

Eminem has also become legendary in his use of homophones to play off more than two meanings in his lyrics. To give just a few recent examples:

- "Dick" in the hook of "Richard" (Obie Trice, *Bottoms Up*) refers to the nickname, to Eminem being a jerk, and to his penis—all at once.
- In the second verse of "Won't Back Down" (*Recovery*), "little pricks" refers to small punctures from needles, to Eminem's competitors being diminutive jerks, and to their tiny penises, again simultaneously.
- In his verse in "Above The Law" (Bad Meets Evil, *Hell: The Sequel*), Eminem intends the phrase "I am–Bush" to mean (in that one line only) that he is (George W.) Bush, that he is timid ("bush" is slang for "pussy"), and that he ambushes.
- In the second verse of "Not Afraid" (*Recovery*), "getting capped" refers to Eminem's mysterious rival getting killed, but his choice of words in the preceding bars primes two other concurrent meanings: his rival getting a royal cap atop his head,[24] and his rival getting his teeth sealed or covered.

- In his third verse in "A Kiss" (Bad Meets Evil, *Hell: The Sequel*), Eminem uses "beaver" as the slang term for vagina, but again, his choice of words in the preceding bars primes two other meanings. He draws out the literal meaning of "beaver" by saying "a damn" (obviously homophonous with "a dam") just two words earlier. And he appeals to the memory of Beaver from "Leave It to Beaver" by mentioning "cleavers" in the previous line—the Cleavers being Beaver's family on the show.

The last example deserves special attention. "Leave It to Beaver" and its key characters—including each of the Cleavers—are rapped about in the hard-fought exchange between B-Rabbit (Eminem) and Lotto (Nashawn "Ox" Breedlove) in the *8 Mile* movie. After the battle, B-Rabbit confides to Cheddar Bob (Evan Jones): "Yo, that Leave It to Beaver line almost killed me." So, many fans are well primed to get the Theodore "Beaver" Cleaver reference in "A Kiss."[25] Now, Eminem is such an unrestrained artist, and so cognizant of homophony and priming, that he reads into the name Beaver Cleaver what few others have dared to in over a half-century, and he primes that warped reading in a song by Bad Meets Evil. Eminem leaves no doubt that he is the second of this duo. In particular, he amplifies the evil of female genital mutilation (if that were possible) by evoking the cute innocence that is "Leave It to Beaver" in the subliminal background. That evil-highlighting background is further strengthened by Eminem's overlapping reference to beavers, which are conspicuously cute furry animals. Incidentally, "damn" (like "beaver") does triple-work here: its homophony with "dam" primes "beaver" in the same line; its hell-associated meaning ("damnation") also primes several words in the next line ("demon," "behemoth," and "evil"); and it is used in a fixed phrase as a swear word.

Like it or not, this is horrorcore rap at its finest. It is a Detroit-born genre that Eminem honors with his Slim Shady persona and his extraordinary lyrical skills. Eminem is rightfully proud of his own lyrics, and he is famously hostile toward fatuous lyricists (see "Syllables," *Syllables* single). The mutilation-by-cleavers threat in "A Kiss" is aimed at female pop artists, for instance. Specifically, he taunts Katy Perry (think "Boom! Boom! … Moon! Moon!" repeated fourteen times) and Lady Gaga (think "You're Lebanese, you're Orient!") by name, before using the word "divas" at the end of a line. The next few lines end in a different compound rhyme, but each contains an internal rhyme that closely matches "divas": "cleavers," "beaver," and "Evil." These four words are dispersed across four lines and also diverge in meaning, but they are mind-linked because they rhyme (especially in Eminem's black accent). The goal—apart from rhythm and

flow—is for the listener to combine the obvious meanings of these words (including the slang meaning of "beaver") into a single, horrifying concept. The same lines also contain other internal near-rhymes ("demon," "behemoth," "seethin,'" etc.), which further strengthen the rhythm, flow, and concept.

The foregoing all takes place in under five seconds, and serves to illustrate that priming also works between words that are not identical but similar in sound. In particular, psycholinguistic experiments show that rhyming words prime each other. For example, try completing the following sentence:

The man walked into the bank and slipped on some ice. He'd gone to deposit his payment and nearly broke his _____.

Possible completions include "ankle," "foot," "arm," etc. If "payment" is replaced by "check" in the sentence, you are more likely to end it with "neck"—a rhyme-priming effect. This effect is documented for everyday speech,[26] but is much stronger in rap, of course. For example, Eminem famously conjured the N-word (without saying it) in "Criminal" (*The Marshall Mathers LP*) by ending one line in the word "quicker," and ending the following line in the non-rhyming word "word," priming his listeners to "fill in the blank" (as in the sentence above). Relatedly, in "Till I Collapse" (*The Eminem Show*) he even avoids a euphemism for the N-word by substituting "wizzle" for "nizzle" in Snoop Dogg/Lion's well-known expression "for shizzle, my nizzle."[27] Parenthetically, this expression is immediately preceded by another interesting application of rhyme-priming. Eminem hesitantly compares his resounding success to "pop fizzing up," playing off the homophony of "pop." Crucially, "fizzle" is a synonym of "fizz," with an alternative meaning: while soda pop fizzes (up), pop music fizzles (out). And so our hip-hop-primed minds and ears virtually anticipate Eminem's next move: he fills the next two lines with *-izzle* suffixes/rhymes.

What about words (or phrases) that do not rhyme perfectly? These are important in any discussion of Eminem because he attaches special importance to them himself (see, for example, "Yellow Brick Road," *Encore*). Such words can prime each other, too. Joe Stemberger reports that people are better at using irregular verbs like "fall" or "freeze" in the past tense when the subject happens to prime the right vowel—"the ch*e*ck f*e*ll," "the chr*o*me fr*o*ze"—and they tend to make mistakes when the subject happens to prime the wrong vowel—"the ch*a*lk f*a*lled," "the cr*e*am fr*ee*zed."[28] Eminem jokingly illustrates this kind of priming mistake in "Kill You" (*The Marshall Mathers LP*): he says "tweece" before correcting himself ("twice"), following a string of words with [i] (the FLEECE vowel), including "80 G's a week" in the same line.[29]

More subtly, Eminem is known for "bending" words in ways that would sound odd out of context, but not in his raps, again thanks to priming. In Dr. Dre's 2011 single "I Need A Doctor," for example, he fiddles with the pronunciation of [ʌ] (the STRUT vowel) in "son" so that it better assonates/rhymes with [ɔ] (the THOUGHT vowel) in three preceding words in the same bar. If these words did not precede it, Eminem's pronunciation of "son" would be odd. Similarly, in 50 Cent's "My Life" he alters [ɪ] (the KIT vowel) in "elect*ri*city" to align it with the verse's assonance in [ʌ]. In Funkmaster Flex's "If I Get Locked Up" (*The Tunnel*), he rhymes "baked" with "degrees" by changing the latter's last vowel to [e] (the FACE vowel). Again, priming is crucial to pulling this off. In the same song he changes "sedation" to "sedadation" to sound-align it with "medication," which appears in the previous line. In "The Way I Am" (*Marshall Mathers LP*), some words are stressed on the wrong vowel (for example, "the inDEX/ or pinKY") due to the strong anapestic rhythm of the song (recall that even the piano goes "plink-plink-PLINK" throughout). In all these cases, a preceding sound structure is carried over partially to a following word, a form of priming.[30]

Of course a string of words with the same vowel (assonance) usually primes actual words with their conventional pronunciations in the rapper's mind. For instance, in "Sing For The Moment" (*The Eminem Show*) Eminem says "he don't" in the middle of a line that has [o] (the GOAT vowel) in four preceding words, whereas in "Love You More" (*Encore*) he uses "doesn't" as this word is preceded by "cuz" and "puzzle." The word "again" in particular takes on a variety of pronunciations depending on the vowels in words before or after it in the verse. Another example is "root," which he tends to pronounce with [u] (the GOOSE vowel; for example, "It's Okay," *Infinite*; "If I Had," *The Slim Shady EP*; "The Lunch Truck Battle," *8 Mile*) but he pronounces it with [ʊ] (the FOOT vowel) in some songs, for the sake of rhyming. For instance, he adopts this pronunciation at the end of one bar in the 2000 single "Quitter" because the preceding bars end in words with [ʊ] ("hood," "woods"). This is a legitimate pronunciation in many parts of the U.S., but even listeners who are unfamiliar with it are primed by preceding words, so they either don't mind or don't notice.

Not surprisingly, black English provides much of the variation in Eminem's words. For example, in verses that assonate in [ɪ] (the KIT vowel), he tends to substitute [ɪ] for [ɛ] (the DRESS vowel) before nasal sounds ("p*e*n," "*E*min*e*m") and likewise he tends to substitute [ɪ] for [i] (the FLEECE vowel) before the "l" sound ("r*ea*l," "d*ea*ler").[31] Both are pronunciation features of black English. In the same way, he usually pronounces "thing" with [ɪ] but he adopts the black "thang" pronunciation in "When I'm Gone" (*Curtain Call: The Hits*), to force a rhyme with "pain." Like most whites, he also says

"aunt" as "ant"—for example, he rhymes "Aunt Peg" with "pant leg" in "Scary Movies" (*Bad Meets Evil, Nuttin' to Do / Scary Movies*)—but he takes on the black pronunciation of "aunt" in "Guilty Conscience" (*The Slim Shady LP*), where he rhymes "aunt's cribs" with "blonde wigs." Relatedly, he adopts the black pronunciation of "ask" as "aks" in a verse of "The Reunion" (Bad Meets Evil, *Hell: The Sequel*), where this word is surrounded by other "aks" sequences: "backseat/ … taxi/ … Maxi … actually ask me/ … smacks me." In "Jimmy Crack Corn" (*The Re-Up*) he even appropriates rapper Chingy's notorious "urr" accent to rhyme "care" with "absurd"/"sir"/etc.[32] He also pronounces "scared of you" as "scurred of you" in the 2009 single "The Warning," to adjust to rhymes in preceding lines: "occur to you" and "prefer to do."

Consonants are also an important source of priming. For instance, your brain responds more strongly to a word if you were just exposed to another word that begins with the same consonant or consonant group (alliteration). The brain response in question is somewhat negative, however. Whereas speakers tend to produce rhyming sequences like "pick tick" or "cattle battle" somewhat faster than normal, they tend to produce alliterating sequences like "pick pin" or "cattle cutter" somewhat slower.[33] Moreover, some recent studies show that, when all else is equal, speakers tend to avoid pairing alliterative words in sentences. For instance, speakers prefer "Patty handed an animal to the child" or "Hannah passed a hamster to the child" over "*P*atty *p*assed an animal" or "*H*annah *h*anded an animal" or "Patty *h*anded a *h*amster."[34]

Perhaps for the reason above, Eminem seldom uses alliteration, except when the repeated consonants are useful to convey particular meanings or effects. In "No Love" (*Recovery*), for example, the alliterative phrase "drool or dribble a drop" appears after a line that ends in the homophone "spit," slang for "rap." Eminem uses alliteration here to emphasize the alternate literal meaning of "spit," by exploiting the fact that our English-speaking minds associate *dr* with liquid. Compare "drool," "dribble," "drop," "drip," "drivel," "drizzle," "drench," "drain," "draft/draught," "drink," "drunk," "dram," "dreg," "driblet," etc. (Sound-meaning pairings like *dr* "liquid" cause words with these consonants to prime each other.)[35]

Eminem also makes dramatic if scarce use of consonance (the repetition of consonants regardless of position). Notably, in "Kill You" (*The Marshall Mathers LP*) he delivers a sequence of ten "v"s ("I in*v*ented *v*iolence…") that culminate in his rendition of a chainsaw "vrinnn vrinnn VRINNN!" He especially favors the repetition of so-called "vulgar" consonants. These are sounds that are articulated with the lips ("p," "b," "f," "v," "m") or with the back of the tongue ("c/k," "g," "ng") or with both ("qu/kw," "gu/gw,"

"w/wh"), which are hugely overrepresented in vulgar words, at least in English.[36] Good examples include not only swear words ("piss off, goddamn mu'fuckin' cocksuckers!") but also slurs of all types ("spic," "spook," "wop," "mick," "gook," "polack," "guido," "kike," "canuck," "paki," "cracker," "wigga," "pig," "cop," "fag," "fop," "punk," "wacko," etc.) as well as taboo body parts and functions ("boob," "bum," "cock," "prick," "pecker," "muff," "poontang," "cum," "frig," "bang," "wank," "screw," "bugger," "crap," "poop," "puke," etc.). Eminem knows this instinctively and he purposely primes profanity into some appropriate songs by overusing "rude" consonant sounds. As a striking example/exercise, get the lyrics of "Square Dance" (*The Eminem Show*), among other things a dis song against Canibus, and underline or circle all "vulgar" consonant sounds.

Finally, we briefly consider the subtlest type of priming—one that relies neither on sound or meaning, but only on grammar. Here's an easy example: if you call a store that closes at 5 o'clock and ask, "What time do you close?," the storekeeper is likely to say, "5 o'clock." But if you ask, "At what time do you close?," the more likely response is, "At 5 o'clock." That is, the grammar of your question primes the storekeeper's grammar. It is clear that Eminem is aware of grammatical priming. For instance, one line in a "A Kiss" (Bad Meets Evil, *Hell: The Sequel*) has the purposely convoluted construction: "Him don't … do him?" In more usual black English, the beginning of this line would be "He don't…" and the ending would be "do he?" (as Kuniva asks in "Hallie's Revenge," *Straight from the Lab*). Eminem asks "do him?" rather than "do he?" (or "does he?") in order to force a rhyme with two other lines ("…to 'em" and "…through him"). Crucially, at the beginning of the line, he also says, "Him don't…" rather than "He don't…" (or "He doesn't…"), apparently in order to prime us for "do him?" at the end of the line.

I also have the impression that Eminem recycles grammatical constructions through much of his lyrics, something that is predicted by grammatical priming. For example, in the outro of "Mockingbird" (*Encore*) he uses two double-object constructions in a row ("buy you a mockingbird … give you the world") and then switches to a series of sentences with prepositional phrases ("buy a … ring for you … sold it to ya"). In his second verse of "Renegade" (Jay-Z, *The Blueprint*), he uses the grammatical frame "__ as __" in both bars of the "cake/Dixie" line, and he uses the frame "__ with __" in both bars of the "Mormons/Catholics" line. Repeating grammatical structures like this improves a song's flow at an abstract level.[37] A study is needed to see if his use of the various grammatical features listed in the first part of this essay also primes him to reuse them in a verse.

To summarize, psycholinguistic experiments reveal that hearing or saying an utterance causes a huge variety of words and phrases that are

related in sound, meaning or structure to be activated in the subconscious brain. The strongest evidence for such "priming effects" may well come from rappers like Eminem who can quickly assemble clever and intricate verses while freestyling or battling. As psycholinguists have observed:

> [T]he primary purpose of language is to convey information from a speaker to a listener. The results of our experiments indicate that the choice of words used to convey this information depends on a lexical access process that is influenced by a combination of form and meaning. Perhaps the "special" examples of language…, such as poetry, are in fact a natural consequence of this property of lexical access. If so, then poetry, puns, and other forms of wordplay should not be viewed as exceptions to normal language use. Indeed, they may provide useful insights into the organization and operation of human language.[38]

What sets Eminem apart is his ability to set off chain reactions in our brains with his music. The lyrical choices made by his pen and paper are of such quality and quantity that his listeners are caught in a crossfire of sounds, meanings, and structures that prime themselves and each other.

Conclusion

Much like Eminem consciously primes our subconscious brains with his lyrics, my essay aimed to make explicit a selection of what his fans already know implicitly. Specifically, by documenting some of the sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics in his music, I hope to have contributed to an appreciation of Eminem, "the first poet laureate of the white working class."[39] That individualized appreciations like this are sorely needed in today's hip hop is apparent not only from its endless detractors ("How can you listen to this crap?") but also from some of its listeners. For example, Eminem was included twice in a recent list of worst rap lyrics from the last year or so.[40] The first entry is his "butt police" line in Rihanna's "Numb" (*Unapologetic*). Eminem repeats "rear" twice to evoke police sirens as well as a female's rear end. That is, "butt police" primes two word meanings and he manages to build both into the next line with a single non-ambiguous word. This is ingenious and entirely characteristic of both his wordcraft and his Shady persona, yet his creativity is not only unappreciated, but assessed as "the worst."[41]

Eminem's second inclusion in the "worst rap lyrics" list is his "spaghett-even" line in 50 Cent's "My Life." Eminem's wordplay is again the focus of derision, but there is much going on here worth appreciating. One point of interest is his pronunciation of the first syllable of "spaghetti"/"spaghett-even." He causes its unaccented vowel to assonate with other vowels—both accented and unaccented—throughout much of the verse. This may be the

first time that a rapper (or any poet) has successfully anchored a verse in largely unaccented internal rhymes. This lyric is also significant in that Eminem transforms spaghetti from the comfort food that he might've thrown up in his insecurity before a battle ("Lose Yourself," *8 Mile*) to the power food that currently fuels his revenge on critics. Fans can only appreciate this change in connotation, whether it should have come from two decades of rapping experience, or from a split-second schizzo-switch to Slim Shady. Certainly Eminem listeners are now primed to hear "spaghetti" in a new way. I would even venture that spaghetti is only a few mentions away from becoming to Eminem what Campbell's soup was to Andy Warhol. (Google Eminem + spaghetti to convince yourself.) The general point I am getting at is one made long ago by Tim Brennan, whose rhetorical questions serve well as an envoi:

> What if one claimed that the pleasures of rap—like the colors of Da Vinci and the polyphonies of Bach—had to be learned, deliberately, as in the art appreciation courses? Or that those who could not, at least by projection, understand such pleasures were in some basic sense uneducated? … How can one get to the tactical point of insisting on rap's formal expertise when the very sense of it as art is so weak?[42]

Chapter Notes

1. Paul Toogood, producer, *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap* (Beverly Hills, CA: Indomina, 2012).

2. Sali Tagliamonte, *Analysing Sociolinguistic Variation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 181.

3. Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte, "Back to the Present: Verbal -s in the (African American) English Diaspora," in Raymond Hickey, ed., *Legacies of Colonial English: Studies of Transported Dialects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

4. Walt Wolfram, "The Grammar of Urban African American Vernacular English," in Bernd Kortmann and Edgar W. Schneider, eds., *Handbook of Varieties of English* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2004), 322.

5. Lisa J. Green, *Language and the African American Child* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 214.

6. Walt Wolfram, *A Linguistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969).

7. Ibid., 17.

8. John R. Rickford and Russell J. Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English* (New York: Wiley, 2000), 87.

9. Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2009), 189.

10. H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right: The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 121.

11. Ibid., 124.

12. Cecelia Cutler, Crossing Over: White Teenagers, Hip Hop and African American English (PhD diss., New York University, 2002).

13. Julie Dougherty, "My Name Is: The Linguistic Construction of Slim Shady, Eminem, and Marshall Mathers" (Masters essay, Georgetown University, 2007).

14. Neal Hutcheson, producer, *Voices of North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Language and Life Project, 2005).

15. Wolfram, "The Grammar," 322.

16. Green, *Language*, 100.

17. Jonathan Scott, "Sublimating Hiphop: Rap Music in White America," *Socialism and Democracy* 18 (2004): 144.

18. Eminem also drops some *r*'s between vowels; when he first pronounces "story" in "Yellow Brick Road" (*Encore*), or when he says "lyrics" in the single "Syllables," to give just two examples. In northern cities this pattern is unique to black English.

19. Bridget Anderson, "Dialect Leveling and /ai/ Monophthongization Among African American Detroiters," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 6 (2002): 86–98.

20. "Session One," *Recovery* [deluxe version].

21. "The Re-Up," Eminem Presents the Re-Up.

22. Dr. Dre, "I Need A Doctor," single.

23. Matthew J. Traxler, *Introduction to Psycholinguistics* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley, 2012), 117.

24. As in: "to be provided with a (royal) cap." Princeton's WordNet also defines "capped" as an adjective with the meaning "covered as if with a cap or crown especially of a specified kind." Compare "cloud-capped mountains"; "brown-capped mushrooms"; "snow-capped peaks."

25. Also not lost on at least some fans is the otherwise obscure fact that Beaver, who is identified with Eminem in the B-Rabbit vs. Lotto battle, was played by an actor with the same last name (Jerry Mathers).

26. David Rapp and Arty Samuel, who conducted the study, took numerous precautions to ensure that participants' rhyme-priming was not "built-in" in any part of their experiment. David N. Rapp and Arthur G. Samuel, "A Reason to Rhyme: Phonological and Semantic Influences on Lexical Access," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 28 (2002): 564–571.

27. The foregoing relates to the phenomenon of rhyming slurs—when people use a short phrase to conjure a slur that the phrase rhymes with. For example, racists use the phrase "pitch and pine" to conjure the rhyming slur "shine" for blacks. Similarly, "Jew" is conveyed by "fifteen and two," "box of glue" or "pot of glue." Rhyming slurs are common in British and Australian English. A well-known Cockney example is "trouble and strife" for "wife." See Antonio Lillo, "From Alsatian Dog to Wooden Shoe: Linguistic Xenophobia in Rhyming Slang," *English Studies* 82 (2001): 336–348.

28. Joseph P. Stemberger, "Phonological Priming and Irregular Past," *Journal of Memory and Language* 50 (2004): 82–95.

29. Elsewhere, he actually embraces such priming mistakes precisely because they improve the rhyme or rhythm of the song. In "Shake That" (*Curtain Call*), for instance, he changes "shit-faced" to "shit-face-ted" immediately after the similar-meaning word "wasted." This is a priming mistake, but he retains it because it improves rhyming. In "Fast Lane" (Bad Meets Evil, *Hell: The Sequel*) he uses the marked past tense form "spitted," which fits better than "spat" with the surrounding vowels and rapid rhythm of the verse. (He uses "spat" elsewhere, for example in the single "Fly Away.")

30. Eminem also gets away with such bending because our brains restore words

to their original "stored" pronunciations when we listen anyhow. For instance, psycholinguistic research has long shown that if you edit a recording by substituting a cough noise for a vowel or consonant in the middle of a word, listeners will hear the edited word as if it had been pronounced perfectly and as if the cough had happened just before or after it (Traxler, *Psycholinguistics*, 69). Our brains proffer "top-down" information like this so that speech can remain intelligible even in very noisy acoustic conditions. "Sound restoration effects" are especially important in rap music, where speech must compete for our ears with loud beats, samplings, etc.

31. Eminem's verse in "The Re-Up" (*Eminem Presents the Re-Up*) is a good example. In "Not Afraid" (*Recovery*) his black English rendering of "feelings" as "fillings" is primed not by [ɪ] but by the word "teeth" in the previous bar, and it sets up two other dentistry double entendres in the next line.

32. Chingy hails from St. Louis, Missouri, where some blacks naturally pronounce [ːɜ] (the SQUARE vowel) as [ɜː] (the NURSE vowel) such that, for instance, "there" becomes "thurr," "e'erbody" becomes "urrbody," etc. Chingy also occasionally pronounces [r] (the NEAR vowel) as [ɜː], so that "here" becomes "hurr."

33. Christine A. Sevald and Gary S. Dell, "The Sequential Cuing Effect in Speech Production," *Cognition* 53 (1994): 91–127.

34. T. Florian Jaeger, Katrina Furth and Caitlin Hilliard, "Incremental Phonological Encoding During Unscripted Sentence Production," *Frontiers in Psychology* 3, no. 481 (2012): 1–22.

35. The priming effect is especially strong with certain sound-meaning pairings, like *gl* "light/vision" ("glimmer," "glisten," "glitter," "gleam," "glow," "glint," etc.) and *sn* "nose/mouth" ("snore," "snack," "snout," "snarl," "snort," "sniff," "sneeze," etc.). See Benjamin K. Bergen, "The Psychological Reality of Phonaesthemes," *Language* 80 (2004): 290–311.

36. "Vulgar" is an example in itself. See Roger W. Wescott, "Labio-Velarity and Derogation in English: A Study in Phonosemic Correlation," *American Speech* 46 (1971): 123–137.

37. Grammatical priming is difficult to apply because rhyme takes precedence over grammar in rap. Eminem illustrates this while poking fun at pretentious grammar in one of his Wake Up Show freestyles: "I'm back out looking for someone of to beat the crap out" (Sway & King Tech, *Wake Up Show Freestyles Vol. 5*).

38. Rapp and Samuel, "A reason to rhyme," 570. Seth Lindstromberg and Frank Boers also demonstrate that rhyming, assonance and alliteration are especially common in fixed phrases and idioms. For example, "When the cat's away, the mice will play" could be worded differently, as in "When the cat's gone, the mice will play," but it's not. Seth Lindstromberg and Frank Boers, "Phonemic Repetition and the Learning of Lexical Chunks: The Power of Assonance," *System* 36 (2008): 423–436.

39. Scott, "Sublimating Hiphop," 144.

40. "The 20 Worst Rap Lyrics of 2012," last modified December 17, 2012. http://www.aux.tv/2012/12/the–20-worst-rap-lyrics-of–2012/. Note also generally negative comments below article.

41. Eminem's "butt police" line is also derided in "Numb: Rihanna & Eminem Team Up For Hazy Track Off *Unapologetic*," last modified November 18, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/18/numb-rihanna-eminem-unapologetic_n_2155381.html. Comments there are generally negative, too.

42. Tim Brennan, "Off the Gangsta Tip: A Rap Appreciation, or Forgetting About Los Angeles," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994): 665.