

Sequential BE DONE.

In S. Mufwene , J. Rickford, J. Baugh and G. Bailey (ed.),
The Structure of African-American English,
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COEXISTENT SYSTEMS IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Sequential BE DONE.

AAVE also shows the combination of **be** and **done** as **be done**. This can frequently be translated as equivalent to the GE future perfect, equivalent to 'will have done.' This is explicit in the alternation of *be done* with *will be done* as in the contracted form *I'll be done*... .As an equivalent of the future perfect, it is not simply an aspect marker but a combination of tense and aspect which indicates both completion and location in the future. The future perfect is attached to the first of two successive events in the future, and asserts that the first action will occur and be completed before the second. This relationship is prototypically indicated by the phrase *by the time*.

- (41) My ice cream's gonna **be done** melted by the time we get there.
[25-year-old woman; Dayton 1984]
- (42) So they can **be done** ate their lunch by the time they get there.
[30-year-old woman at vacation summer school; Dayton 1984]
- (43) I should **be done** lost 70 pounds by the time we get there
[25-year-old woman; Dayton 1984]
- (44) 'Cause I'll **be done** put--stuck so many holes in him he'll wish he
wouldna said it. [member of the Jets, 16; Labov et al. 1968]

- (45) We **be done** washed all the cars by the time JoJo gets back with the cigarettes. [at a church car-wash; Baugh 1980]

The semantic interpretation of (41-45) is shown in Figure 1. Along the time line, the time of speaking is indicated by "0", and two events in the future by "A" and "B." When **be done** is attached to the first of the two future events, it indicates that this event will be completed before the second one occurs. Like the GE future perfect, this gives information on location in future time as well as the completed character of the first event.

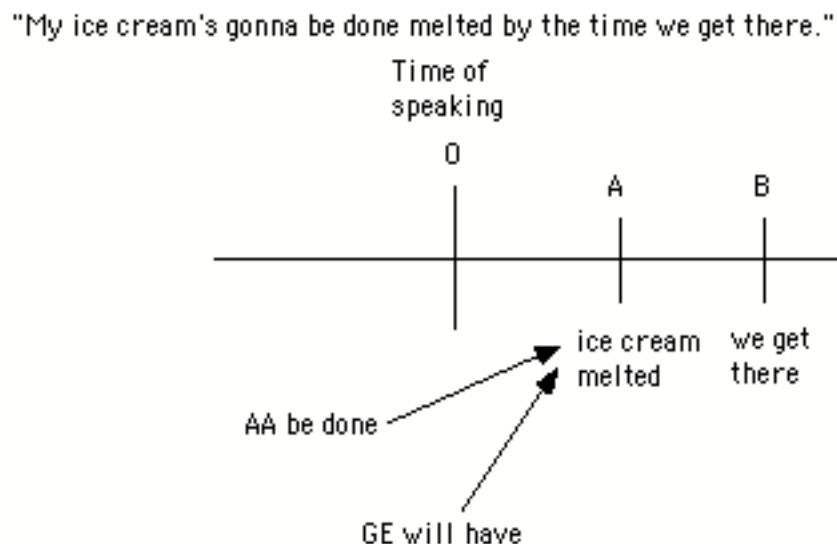


Figure 1. AA **be done** as a future perfect tense, attached to the first of two future events.

The formal relationship with *will have + en* is strengthened by the fact that **be done** is followed by a past participle form. In a number of cases, the regular *-ed* form is neutralized by the following context, but whenever there is a vowel following, or an irregular past, we find the past form of the participle realized. We do not find forms like *We be done wash all the cars. . .*

A first indication that AA **be done** is not equivalent to GE *will have* comes from utterances that are not located in the future. Both (46) and (47) are not located at any particular time, and refer to a general condition, so that translations with *will have* are misleading.

- (46) They **be done** spent my money before I even get a look at it.
[Baugh 1983]
- (47) It stink in there. You **be done** spit up before you order.
[of a Chinese restaurant, Dayton 1981]

A number of examples show that AAVE **be done** is distinct from the GE future perfect in that it does not locate events in the future; in fact, it is free of any

reference to absolute location in time. In both (48) and (49), the first event is firmly located in the past, the second in the present.

(48) Here I am talkin' shit. You **be done** slapped me by now.
[‘you would have usually walked away from me by now’,
Dayton 1981]

(49) I coulda **be done** ran up the steps by now. [Dayton 1981]

A radically different meaning of **be done** appears in (50). Here the aspect marker is attached to the second of two events, and it cannot be translated by the General English future perfect.

(50) I’ll **be done** killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my
kid again. [Baugh 1980]

The interpretation of this utterance depends upon an understanding of the exact circumstances in which it was said. During the summer, a number of young men called "Cool Aids" were employed at the pool to keep order. One of them had apparently restrained one of the boys swimming at the pool in a way that his father thought was too rough. He was very angry, and came to the pool for a confrontation. (50) was his summary statement of the situation. Here **be done** is attached to the second of two events that follow the time of speaking, as shown in Figure 2.

This is a new use developed in AAVE. The meaning that can best be assigned to it combines relative location in time with 'inevitable result', and might then be termed a *future resultative*. It is then a member of the modal system rather than the aspect system, since it deals with the degree of reality attributed to an event. Dayton traces its development as a separate sense of **be done** in a large number of examples. Most of them, like (50) are threats or warnings. Dayton points out that although **be done** does not in itself carry the meaning of a threat, the speech act of threatening is the discourse matrix from which this meaning has arisen.

(51) He [a nephew] knows best not to talk back to me 'cause I **be done**
slapped the little knock kneed thing upside the head.
[19-year-old woman; Dayton 1981]

(52) Get outta my way or I’ll **be done** slid you in the face!
[to a dog, barking; 25-year-old woman; Dayton 1981]

(53) Don't do that 'cause you **be done** messed up your clothes!

[to cousins 4,5,6 running up and down steps, 27-year-old woman;
Dayton 1981]

Among the observations of AAVE made by Rev. Giles, reported by Edwards (1991), there are three examples of **be done**. Two are single clauses that do not provide enough context to assign them to the types of Figures 1 or 2. The third gives more context:

(54) Stop it dammit before I **be done** lay down my religion.

This sentence is plainly a threat that the speaker will abandon his usual peaceful conduct and become violent. The aspect marker **be done** is assigned to the second of two events. Though Edwards states that "this construction is used in [AAVE] as a future perfective", a translation with *will have* will not do. This example, recorded from Detroit, reinforces the observations made in Los Angeles, New York and Philadelphia which indicate that the resultative construction is quite frequent in AAVE use, and demonstrates again the homogeneity of AAVE throughout the United States.

"I'll be done killed that motherfucker if he tries to lay a hand on my kid again."

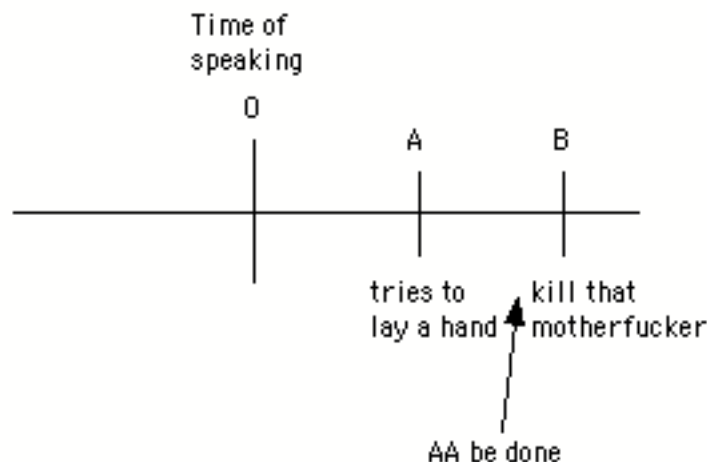


Figure 2. AA **be done** as a resultative aspect, attached to the second of two future events.

The typical future location of the two events may reflect the historical origins of **be done** and its connection with threats and warnings. But Dayton points out that like other AA elements, **be done** resultative does not essentially carry tense information, and it can be used to refer to inevitable consequence in past, present or future. We find **be done** used in observations about a general conditions, as in (55):

(55) I don't pay them no attention, child. If you pay them attention, you **be done** went batty. [Dayton 1981]

In (56) and (57), the first event is not located in the future, but in the general present, while the second is an event that will follow in the future.

(56) I don't want no silver dollars in my possession because I **be done** dropped them in the machines.

[25-year-old woman, Dayton 1984]

(57) If you love your enemy, they **be done** eat you alive in this society. [Dayton 1981]

If this is the case, this second **be done** should be termed simply the *resultative*. Its relation to its origin in the future perfect is signaled by the fact that the past form of the participle is still retained although the semantics do not focus on the completion or terminal state of the second event to which **be done** is attached.

The resultative **be done** is also free of any reference to a specific location in time in relation to the moment of speaking. (58) shows **be done** attached to the second of two events. Both are contrary-to-fact conditions; the first fact that is hypothetically contradicted is clearly located in the past, while the consequent holds generally for all succeeding times.

(58) If she wasn't spaded, she'd **be done** got pregnant 'cause she gets out. [Dayton 1981]

A full account of **be done** in Dayton's data must deal with the extension of this form to cases where only a single event is involved, but the sense of 'inevitability' or 'high probability that the event did or will occur' remains. In some ways, this extension of **be done** is parallel to the extension of **be** to 'intensive steady state.' In (59), **be done** expresses the inevitability of both events; in (60) of a series of events; in (61), of a single event, which has already occurred.

(59) I'm gonna **be done** hafta went back and finished in eight years. [30-year-old woman; Dayton 1984].

(60) The readin' of the announcements, all that's gonna **be done** done. [40-year-old woman; Dayton 1984]

(61) A: Where's Mike?
B: He **be done** left. [36-year-old woman; Dayton 1984]

A complete account of **be done** must also consider its compositional character. Do the individual meanings of **be** and **done** survive in the combination,

and can this combination be used to derive its meaning? First, it is apparent that the 'habitual' meaning of **be** does not appear in **be done**, which normally refers to a single event, not an indefinite series of events. Mufwene (p.c.) points out that the use of BE in BE DONE need not carry the semantics of 'habitual' BE, but simply represent the nonfinite form of BE dictated by AAVE syntax, combining with DONE as a required nonfinite coupla. Indeed, Dayton (1996) shows many examples where the meaning of invariant BE must be less specific than 'habitual,' with a core meaning of stativity. The crucial question then is whether the semantics of DONE can be derived from the DONE the independent DONE that appears with adverbial syntax.

We have seen that the 'completive' feature of **done** does survive in the future perfect **be done**, but not in the resultative **be done**. The intensive meaning of **done** does appear in both uses of **be done**, and particularly in the resultative, but since we also find this feature in **be**, it may be a parallel development rather than one inherited from **done**. The feature of moral indignation, which we found the only semantic characteristic for some uses of **done**, is often found with **be done** in combination with other meanings, but never alone, and it may be regarded as a general characteristic of this type of discourse rather than one specific to **be done**.

I have referred here to "two uses" of **be done** rather than two different aspectual particles. They are in complementary distribution rather than contrast, since the interpretation depends on whether **be done** is attached to the first or second of two successive events. The general interpretation is that of a sequence of two events, one completed before the other begins, and we may therefore refer to *Sequential be done* in AAVE.