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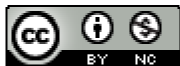

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"Stupid Tingmouth Stuff": Contemporary Language and the Problem of Propriety in *Evelina*

KRISTIN ZODROW

Abstract: New words appear as a result of emergent patterns in contemporary speech and literary works. This essay re-evaluates the well-worn antagonism between living language and coalescing standards of English grammar in the eighteenth century within Frances Burney's first novel, *Evelina* (1778), where this conflict emerges as a uniquely gendered problem. I argue that the novel presents the tension between its two senses of "propriety," correctness in both a social and semantic sense, in its depiction of the speech and behavior of women. Attending to a narrator who calls herself and her compositions "particular" allows us to grasp the import of Burney's neologisms in *Evelina* as well as their reception amid the broader aesthetic and philological debates of her time.

Frances Burney's contribution to English letters can be glimpsed not only in the pages of her novels but also in the pages of the dictionary. In her fiction, journals, and diaries, Burney registered the first use of at least a hundred words that she found or fashioned to describe details of contemporary life, emotional states, ailments, and, in words like "diarize" and "journalize," her writing process. Similarly, the narrator of her first novel *Evelina* (1778) is immersed in the speech of others and has an extraordinary interest in the "particulars" of the language she hears.[1] However, as Burney's protagonist uses new words to depict aspects of her experience, she often becomes aware of how contemporary idioms introduce impropriety into her letters—that is, according to the norms and requirements of standard grammar and speech in the period. In this essay, I examine how *Evelina* explores two senses of "propriety," the first akin to manners which dictate the acceptability of language and, the other, a more linguistic sense which describes a word that fits or is appropriate to a given situation or object. I explore the affinities and contradictions between these accounts of propriety to argue that Burney's interest in neologism and colloquialism, a trademark of speech and behavior in the novel, as Evelina writes, in "every particular" or "particulars," presents the conflict between narrating precisely and narrating politely. Indeed, as the novel portrays

women as the more particular sex, Burney's many neologisms raise and redouble the gendered expectations surrounding language in the eighteenth century, which associated female speech with the flux of living language.

Earlier criticism surrounding the use of contemporary language and neologism in *Evelina* has emphasized Burney's association of neologism and colloquialism with certain characters to facilitate complex social commentary along class, gender, and national lines. In her article "Polite Language and Female Social Agency in Frances Burney's *Evelina*," Kja Isaacson argues that Evelina's growing facility with language over the course of the novel is synonymous with her "entrance into the world," which, on this account, is an education in polite language or the "effective speech that in turn allows agency and social power" (73). Isaacson argues against the notion that Evelina's marriage to Lord Orville catalyzes the novel's conclusion and that her letter writing ceases because of a limit placed on her expression. Instead, she takes this as a sign of the agency Evelina acquires through learning the "patriarchal code" of language and, specifically, through the development of public eloquence that allows her to move beyond her private writing—presumably, off the page and "into the world" (73). Christina Davidson's study of "privileged" and "vulgar" voices in the novel adds to an understanding of contemporary language as a social and political phenomenon in *Evelina* by demonstrating how the speech of various characters evinces broader class-based concerns surrounding language in the eighteenth century. Tracing how eighteenth-century models of language acquisition understood the passive flow of speech from one person to another, Davidson illuminates the ways in which anxieties about shifting language were understood as determining forces in shaping identity and the construction of a public self. Davidson argues that Burney's allocation of language operates in accordance with a carefully "schematized dialogue" in which language functions as a mark of social belonging, though Burney productively confuses this hierarchy by assigning "unruly speech" to upper-class characters within the novel (33, 38). Overall, though Davidson reads *Evelina* as a "social satire" with language norms at the core, her sense is that the narrative still answers to the demands of standard English, despite its mixing of linguistic registers (34). As these studies make clear, an individual's relationship

to English grammar took on moral urgency in the eighteenth century, a shift which Cynthia Wall calls grammar's move "into manners," where it was "increasingly becoming a matter of propriety" ("Rhetoric" 177). Accordingly, Evelina realizes the impropriety of her prose as she travels away from the cloistered Berry Hill and enters new social circles. When first in London, she entreats Villars to forgive the content of her letters, which are "unworthy of your reading" (22). Evelina articulates a sense of her journey as a development in writing when she concludes, "pray excuse the wretched stuff I write perhaps I may improve by being in this town" (22). The run-on sentence lends texture to the claim that the novel has a major interest in Evelina's verbal skills, especially in relation to those of other characters. Indeed, in early scenes, Evelina admits she had trouble speaking "further than a monosyllable," even in the company of Lord Orville, who possesses a flexible and well-stocked conversational storehouse, that ranges seamlessly from "public places, and public performers" to "the amusements and occupations of the country" (26). In these studies, "propriety" emerges as a linguistic and behavioral phenomenon, one tightly linked to status in the public sphere—thus, when properly managed or manipulated, a means of social mobility.

In addition to the more recognizable sense of "propriety" in these articles, *Evelina* develops another sense of "propriety" in a sense that is closer to *suitability* and *appropriateness* of a word to its object or situation. While keeping in play the consequences of the marked idioms of characters who are women, seamen, or French, in this account, I suggest that Burney's use of neologism in her novels and personal writings, a pervasive facet of her oeuvre, complicates the notion that they function in the novel only to discredit the characters who use them—in other words, that they function only in the first sense of "propriety." What interests Burney in these words, which so frequently send her prose out of the bounds of standard English vocabulary and grammar? Not all of Burney's neologisms were first colloquialisms. Instead, the reality that Burney creates words herself leads us to wonder what complexity, if any, their status brings to our examination of her interest in living language. In this way, J. N. Waddell's early study of Burney's lexical contributions is singular in its focus on her idiosyncratic "word formation" which lends her prose a "flexibility" (262). In neologisms that did not endure—like "unrobustify," or others—like

"alphabetize" or "journalize"—that did, Waddell delimits within her many colloquialisms another category of words that result from Burney's "word-craft" (262-63). Waddell's contribution directs us toward neologism in *Evelina* not only as part of Burney's social critique but also as a compositional strategy by which she can devise or select the best word to name something for the reader.

The second sense of "propriety" in *Evelina* emerges most clearly when Burney describes "the *long room* at Hampstead," which was "very well named, for I believe it would be difficult to find any other epithet which might, with propriety, distinguish it, as it is without ornament, elegance, or any sort of singularity, and merely to be marked by its length" (185). Uninspired though the epithet may be, it distinguishes this room from others, which is to say it does its best to name the room's difference from the rest, though it lacks almost "*any* . . . specificity." While acknowledging the mildly mocking tone or the suggestion that there is a better word beyond the bounds of polite speech, Evelina presents the logic behind her naming of the room as a matter of "propriety," the fit between the room and its description. Indeed, in his "Preface to the English Dictionary," Samuel Johnson invokes "propriety" in a similar sense when he takes aim at poets and so-called "illiterate writers" whose "metaphorical" or uncareful use of words makes "hourly encroachments" on language (295). Their "not knowing the original import of words" results in "colloquial licentiousness," meaning these writers "confound distinction, and forget propriety" (295). When words are used irrespective of their meaning, either because of figurative language or ignorance, their "propriety" wanes. Thus, in naming the "*long room*," Evelina searches for the "ornament," "elegance," or "singularity" which would differentiate it from the rest. To describe an object with "propriety" requires specificity and attention to its particular details.

Evelina mobilizes both senses of "propriety" and demonstrates how one complicates the other. When Evelina travels to London, she attends a dance where, fearing she has made a fool of herself, she writes that she "could not help being thus particular" (28). The entry for "particular" in Johnson's *Dictionary* illuminates the unique difficulties of finding oneself "particular" in the eighteenth century. To be "particular" means:

> I. Relating to single persons; not general. . . .
> II. Individual; one distinct from others. . . .
> III. Noting properties or things peculiar. . . .
> IV. Attentive to things single and distinct. . . .
> V. Single; not general. . . .
> VI. Odd; having something that eminently distinguishes him from others. This is commonly used in a sense of contempt. (2: 374)

After attempting to converse in London, Evelina becomes painfully aware that, in this crowd, her behavior and speech distinguish her in an unappealing way. Her self-description as "particular" names both: on the one hand, the difference between her speech and that of the men in the scene and, on the other, the level of detail with which she writes the letter to Villars. In other words, she finds the moment so overwhelming or frustrating, she cannot help but report it in full. Thus, she comes across as "particular" not only in the sense of a person who is "odd" but also in her approach to writing about that experience. While for the male characters in the scene, an affected manner of speech passes as a mark of gentility and confers status, Evelina's way of engaging separates her from present company. Evelina doubts their empty "expressions" "used as words of course . . . without any distinctions of persons, or study of propriety" (23). More specifically, she means that they only denote vacantly, i.e. with indifference to their audience or context. Remarkably, then, as Evelina recognizes her own particularity, she identifies a missing "propriety" on the part of those around her, which, in a carefully bent phrase, names Sir Clement's impropriety as his lack of specificity in speech (23). Evelina flips the word's received moral tenor by reallocating the hazards and "contempt" Johnson associated with the particular to the general—for Evelina, the impropriety of Sir Clement's speech lies in his not having been particular *enough* (2: 374).

The novel's attention to detail and "particular" language places Evelina at the crossroads of these two senses of "propriety." Indeed, in Johnson's second entry for the adjective "particular," he quotes Dryden to demonstrate how representations of the general and the individual map neatly onto the meritorious and the meretricious. Elsewhere, Wall helpfully sketches the "well-known requirements" of description in the early- to mid-eighteenth century and takes up Johnson's notion of the "particular detail" as what is "of no interest to the reader because

it is precisely *not-me*, not part of what *relates* but what *separates* human beings" ("Rhetoric" 269, emphasis original). Wall continues to describe how the particular detail can "trivialize" when it "swings too far from its source, or too or low from its level" ("Rhetoric" 269). My point is not so much that *Evelina* reverses Johnson's evaluation of typicality versus individuality in its attention to the specifics of contemporary language but, rather, that its "particular detail" is an isolating and individualizing hazard. The scene above foregrounds the conflict over what is "proper" about Evelina's concern with using words in a way that is germane to an occasion, though it marks her as single and peculiar. Though she registers discomfort in being found "particular," Evelina asks for "more particulars" throughout the novel concerning other characters and the situations that unfold around her, and she claims to record the "particulars" of her experience. In this way, her depictions of life and language in London are marked by one type of "propriety," in a descriptive sense, though they threaten what is "proper" in another, as Evelina brings the indecorous speech and behavior of characters into relief. As earlier studies of Burney's language have demonstrated, Evelina perceives how the language most suitable to describe the world around her thwarts convention when she takes up uncouth idioms or behaviors of others.

As the trip to the city rapidly begins to "*Londonize*" the "*bumpkinish*" Evelina (20 and 56), she renders her transformation, from neologism to neologism, in the terms of her shifting vocabulary. In London, Evelina journeys far from home and "into the world" (6), and the early days of her travels consist nearly exclusively of scenes of shopping and the closet, spaces where she rapidly picks up new names for new things. On her first day in the city, she goes "*a shopping*, as Mrs. Mirvan calls it . . . to buy silks, caps, gauzes, and so forth" (21). She writes about her hair, which someone has "*frizled*" or tangled with powder and pins under a "great *cushion*" (22). She carefully defines new terms for Villars while holding them at a distance as quoted speech, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* allows us to see a doubleness in her mounting vocabulary: that is, while these words are new to Evelina, they were also coined in *Evelina* and new to contemporary readers—at least, in print. Joyce Hemlow's editorial work in "Letters and Journals of Fanny Burney" explains the effect of their appearance. When Burney prepared her papers for publication before the end of her life, she

directed much of her editorial efforts to removing references to clothes and shopping. The expurgated passages bear a striking resemblance to Evelina's early excursions around London. Burney removed "[t]rivia, or what she considered trivia," namely depictions of shopping, or of details of dress, or of "the soap, candles, and wine that cluttered the chaise on a journey from London to Bookham." In one instance, instead of blanking out a sentence, Burney wrote over it in darker ink, thereby "omitting the soaps and improving the syntax" (Hemlow 30). The edits recall Wall's account of the trivializing effect of the "particular detail," and when the novel sends Evelina into the chandler's shop or many times to the milliner's, as the first major English literary character to go "a-shopping," Evelina enters into a similar drama of handling trifles of seemingly little importance or value.

Burney demonstrates the effect of "particulars" on women, especially, by exaggerating the overburdensome compilation of feminine objects and accessories, as when the Misses Branghton return from Snow Hill and Evelina writes, "[t]he first half-hour was allotted to *making themselves comfortable*, for they complained of having had a very dirty walk . . . [t]he young ladies had not only their coats to brush, and shoes to dry, but to adjust their head-dress, which their bonnets had totally discomposed" (57). In this portrait, the women are only slowly separated from the objects they wear. The interference of their "bonnets" with their "head-dress" goes as far as to make them less "*comfortable*." The presentation of women as uncomfortable contradictions of objects amounts to mockery in another instance when "[p]oor Miss Mirvan cannot wear one of the caps she made, because they dress her hair too large for them" (22). Similarly, in a crucial passage after Sir Clement's carriage heist hoax, Evelina details the "disorder" and "disgrace" of Madame Duval and exemplifies the difficulty that surfaces in separating women from dress and appearance. Evelina writes, "so miserable a figure, I never before saw. Her head-dress had fallen off; her linen was torn; her negligee had not a pin left in it; her petticoats she was obliged to hold on; and her shoes were perpetually slipping off . . . she hardly looked human" (122). In fact, stated more strongly, these objects seem to constitute the "humanity" of women in the novel. The tragedy of this episode comes by way of Madame Duval's coming unfixed from the features of her dress, which, accessory though they may be, seem necessary to compose her. Moreover, when one of the male Branghton

cousins wishes to know which person in the room is tallest but makes the women keep their shoes on, the impossibility of measuring women without their individual properties seems clear. In the contest, "the brother insisted upon measuring *fair*, and not with *heads* and *heels*; but they would by no means consent to lose those privileges of our sex, and therefore the young man was *cast*, as shortest" (57-58). Even though they make the young men lose at their own game, the rules maintain that men will be measured head to toe, but women must be measured from hairdo to heels. The moment registers the doubleness inherent in measuring "*fair*," since in this case it means the opposite of equal treatment and, instead, requires women to remain "fair" in their appearance. The portraits of the women treat them as ineluctably and uncomfortably "particular."

While the men of the novel—especially Mr. Lovel, Mr. Coverley, and the Captain—use vogueish colloquialism and nautical cant, the neologisms of female characters are often bound up with conspicuous "trifles." In *Reading in Detail* (1987), Naomi Schor locates the detail at a nexus of literary and social concerns that translated what was thought to separate women from men generally into the realm of aesthetics, arguing that the eighteenth century was a pivotal period for the aesthetics of "the particular," "particularity," and "the detail," even before its revaluation by Romantic-era writers (xlii). In her account, "the detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine" (xlii). By historicizing the long association between women and particularity, Schor identifies a "normative aesthetics" tracing back to Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art*, which associated femininity with particularity and demonstrated how "sexual hierarchies" operated in how eighteenth-century writers understood representation (ibid). Her account suggests the complexity *Evelina* comes across in its depiction of the speech and language of female characters. Recalling Johnson's equation of the "particular detail" with what is "*not-me*," it may also be accurate to say that he meant not men, or, in other words, not the general type.

Using a more capacious sense of "propriety" as a social, linguistic, and aesthetic category, I have argued Burney raises the difficulty of "propriety" and "particular" language specifically in a gendered context. This is not because women are the only characters

detailed or ridiculed for their defining characteristics—they are not—but because of the central role femininity played in eighteenth-century debates about proper English. Stereotypes of living language associated its fluctuations with femininity in what Janet Sorensen has called its "boundless and chaotic disorder" (81). When Adam Smith delivered his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* in 1762, he linked female fashion to language: "[t]he conversation of the ladies is the best standard of language" since "there is a certain delicacy and agreeableness in their behaviour and address, and . . . whatever is agreeable makes what accompanies it have the deeper impression . . . [f]or this reason we love both their dress and their manner of language" (42). Enabled by the Lockean "impression" as the means by which sensory experience enters the mind as an idea and language is acquired, Smith emphasizes the didactic function of women's speech in relation to the materiality and appearance of their clothing. Smith's conflation of sartorial and verbal style could explain the appearance of colloquialisms within Evelina's journal through their association with fashion, material goods, and other trifles, while moreover highlighting the "deeper impression" of these objects upon language.

Johnson and Smith emphasize, in different ways, the importance of regulating femininity amid efforts to standardize the English language as women's everyday minutiae and trifles came to represent the complicating particulars which worked against semantic fixity and the capacity to generalize. Johnson was acutely aware of women's role in the everyday encroachment of fashionable neologism—in addition to the cant of the working classes and foreign speech—that frustrated philology's ability to settle the flux of words into a coherent system. In an exemplary metaphor for the patriarchal project of defining standard English, he positions himself, resignedly, as a man, "not yet so lost in lexicography, as to forget that *words are the daughters of earth and that things are the sons of heaven*" (280, emphasis original). He describes the relative bluntness of language: "[it] is only the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas: I wish, however, that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote" (280). With words figured as displaced angels, they are relatively lowly and ephemeral. Of course, they are also the "daughters" who, unreliable though they may be, are the only means to grasp the would-be ideal realm of "things" in language. The "wish"

for "daughters" or "signs" to remain in fixed relation to the "things which they denote" is a wish to extend language's capacity in this world by guarding against its contingency. Johnson completes the arc of this metaphor when he speaks with "parental fondness" for the completed reference and recasts his project of creating a dictionary as securing the "daughters" to the "sons," or the earthly, perishable, and mutable beings to the higher forms that they denote (293). In her "Preface" to *Evelina,* Burney describes her literary forefathers, from Rousseau to Johnson, as the many authors who "*have cleared the weeds*," but who have "*also culled the flowers*" (7). She announces a renewed vision for English letters, since, though others before her have "*rendered the path plain, they have left it* barren" (7, my emphasis). Burney may be directly recalling Johnson in her euphemistic reference to overzealous literary pruning and, specifically, his "dusty deserts of *barren* philology" (Johnson 288). Whether or not Burney intends to reference his approach to language, the comparison or departure she announces is substantial. In Waddell's study of Burney's neologisms, he describes how writers and reviewers received Burney's neologisms in relation to lingering standards of English philology and to the work of Johnson even after the eighteenth century. Burney anticipated this very reaction and, in a journal entry she penned in 1788, asks if, "Surely, *I* may make words when at a loss, if *Dr. Johnson* does?" (*EJL* 3: 77).

Burney's rejoinder complicates the idea that even Johnson thought language could transcend its "particularity" or achieve stability. To insist on her rejection of Johnson's linguistic sensibility would reduce his complexity to his identity as the "father" who would marry the "daughters of earth" to the "sons of heaven." Johnson, too, understood the development of contemporary language as part of its historicity. In Lynda Mugglestone's sweeping study of Johnson's *Dictionary*, she describes his sense of writing in "the present" and its relationship to the "record of language" (185). She quotes Johnson, who writes "[a]-gainst fixity, we are instead reminded that 'words are hourly shifting their relations' . . . and prefixes 'are hourly united to new words as occasion requires' . . . language is characterized by the ceaseless nature of change itself" (185). Mugglestone's account captures the dynamism inherent in Johnson's sense of language and suggests how "new words" may enter to upset inherited "relations." The lexicographer understands contemporary language as ephemeral though recalcitrant, as it works

"against fixity" and efforts to systematize. While Johnson's *Dictionary* attempts nevertheless to ground words in etymological roots to promote "propriety," *Evelina* uses the novel as a form through which to grasp language's passing history, its shifting relations, finding new sources for language in the particulars of everyday and idiomatic speech. In this way, the language and behavior of female characters may be uniquely suited for the novel's exploration of standard English, which was, in part, embodied by women in the period.

In her published works and private writings, many of Burney's coinages, including the verbs "journalize" or "diarize," as well as the markedly more enduring "alphabetize" and "quantify," offer a vocabulary for describing the dynamic between systematicity and living language. That is, while her neologisms smack of the contemporary, their disruptive "particularity" also suggests a means by which to order life's particulars. Burney's letter to Samuel Crisp in 1775 neatly encapsulates this dynamic, as she attempts to summon "a long Detail of affairs" though her "marvellous, miscellanious Hodge Podge of Intelligence" is "quite over stocked with materials" (*EJL* 2: 73-74). She mentions recent writing, composed at the seaside town of Teignmouth, which she calls her "stupid Tingmouth stuff" (*EJL* 2: 73). In order to keep from rehearsing anxieties about the quality of her prose, she begins to describe recent events, "*Alphabetticaly,*" or, as Johnson's dictionary would have it, "according to the order of the letter" (*EJL* 2: 74 and Johnson, *Dictionary* 575). The transition from the "marvellous, miscellanious Hodge Podge" to proceeding "[a]lphabetically" suggests how the "long Detail" of unruly and unsortable experience interacts with systems, and how Burney attempts to measure, order, and compose, counterintuitively, through the twist of the "Tingmouth" or the words of a "particular" narrator.

NOTES

[1] See "particular[/s]": Evelina's words, except where otherwise noted—"I was afterwards acquainted with some particulars of the conversation" (102); "Madame Duval was entertaining Mr. Branghton with all the most secret and cruel particulars of my situation!" (58); "Her curiosity was insatiable; she inquired into every action of my life, and every particular" (56); "the Captain roughly maintaining the superiority of the English in every particular" (47); Lady Howard, to Mr. Villars, about the trip to London: "so particular an occasion" (17); "The Captain demanded particulars" (113); Mr. Villars to Lady Howard: "But I will not trouble your Ladyship with the particulars of this disagreeable conversation" (134); Madame Duval, in conversation with Mr. Branghton: his request, "Well, but cousin, tell me some of the particulars of this affair" and her reply, "As to the particulars, . . ." (138); "Soon after tea, Miss Branghton took an opportunity to tell me . . . many other particulars of his circumstances and family" (140); "I asked them some further particulars concerning him" (146); "she proceeded to tell us how ill she had been used . . . and many other particulars" (170); McCartney to Evelina: "the particulars of that misery of which you have, so wonderfully, been a witness" (188); and again, "When she recovered, she confessed all the particulars of a tale" (190); "I cannot relate the particulars of what passed" (198); "her questions obliged me to own almost all the particulars of my acquaintance with Mr. Macartney" (249).

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