Dutch expletives: another sandwich?

Expletives can be encompassed in two different groups depending on their source morphemes, whether they come from the pronominal or the adverbial set. Projected onto a contrastive picture involving English, Dutch and German, we obtain a nice correlation, with pronominal expletives being used for core-grammatical functions (besides pronouns used in ascriptive constructions, true expletives like with meteorological verbs) and adverbial expletives in existential and presentational constructions also used for more peripheral functions (locative, oblique), as shown in Tab. 1 (see Gaeta 2023 for details).

Along this continuum, the turning point is given by the PART function, namely the usage as expletive in existential and presentational constructions. Dutch sides with English against German which exploits a pronominal expletive as shown in (1).

On the other hand, Dutch stands out against its sister languages having developed at least one adverbial expletive in a clear core-grammatical function, namely to introduce a subject-less clause as shown in (2) (see Bech 1968, Donaldson 2008: chap. 15).

While in English the locative expletive does not represent a viable grammatical alternative to the pronominal one, in German the locative adverb *da* behaves rather like a text connective. In fact, *da* can only serve as a textually marked alternative to the pronoun *es* which functions as unmarked place-holder of the first sentence position. In Dutch the locative expletive *er* has fully acquired an expletive function and therefore contrasts both with the English expletive *it* which is generalized for the subject role and with the German place holder which disappears if another constituent occupies the first sentence position, as shown in (3).

Thus, Dutch locative expletives have developed their own structural profile which clearly contrasts with the different distribution of pronominal expletives occurring in English and German.

Function	English	Dutch		German
ascriptive	*it*	*het*		*es*
expletive	*it*	*er*	*het*	*es*
PART	*there*	*er*		*es*
locative	*there*	*er*		*da*
oblique / partitive	*there-*	*er*		*da-*
Tab. 1: The functional space of expletives in English, Dutch and German				

(1) G *Es gibt eine Maus in der Ecke.*

   D *Er zit een muis in de hoek.*

   E *There is a mouse in the corner.*

(2) G *Es / Da wird gesagt, dass sie nicht da ist.*

   D *Er / Het wordt gezegd dat ze er niet is.*

   E *It / *There is said that she is not there.*

(3) G *Heute wird gesagt, dass er ein neuer Gott ist.*

   D *Vandaag wordt er gezegd dat er een nieuwe God is.*

   E *Today it is said that he is a new God.*

References

Bech, G. 1968. Über das niederländische Adverbialpronomen *er*. In J. Hoogteijling (ed.), *Taalkunde in artikelen. Een verzameling artikelen over het Nederlands*, 147–174. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.

Donaldson, B. 2008. *Dutch. A Comprehensive Grammar*. 2nd ed. London & New York: Routledge.

Gaeta, L. 2023. Pure existentials vs. pure presentationals: finding an existence out(side) of place. In L. Sarda & L. Lena (eds.). *Existential constructions across languages: Forms, meanings and functions*, 100–135. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.