

The name of this book is *Barbara Visser is er niet*.

By Paul Elliman

For a while this was Barbara's outgoing answer-phone message. I checked an online translator and it gave me *Barbara fishermen are not there*. More realistically it would be something like *Barbara Visser ain't here*, but what is realism to language? Not only does it miss the refrain, a kind of echo on the line that rhymes *is er* with *Visser*, it also loses the special ambiguousness of the *er*, a word that often isn't quite here either.

Not strictly a filler like those *ers*, *ums* and *ahs* that punctuate the grammar of our conversation – or a *disfluency*, to use the more technical term – in Dutch, *er* is an actual word, even if a shadowy one. In the sentence *Barbara Visser is er niet*, it does mean 'there' (remove it and Barbara, if only in a grammatical sense, ceases to exist). But sentences with *er* could just as often mean the same thing whether the *er* was there or not.

Stef Grondelaers, a researcher at the University of Leuven, is a specialist of the word *er*, an *er*-scholar. And while Grondelaers suggests that its passive form can be connected to the English filler *er*, he's much more interested in the Dutch word's ability to transform itself into a decisive part of the sentence.

A Dutch newspaper article on Grondelaers outlines several *ers* in use in the Dutch and Flemish language: '*Er* is a weakened form of *there* (*daar*), it also occurs in combination with prepositions (at it/*eraan*, against it/*ertegen*, therewith/*ermee*), and in combination with numbers: 'How many do you have *there*? I have ten *here*.' It can also occur – and this is the use that Grondelaers studies – in combination with indefinite topics. 'A bird sings *there*' is not the same as 'a bird sings'. The latter sentence could mean that all birds sing. Whereas *there* in 'a bird sings *there*' addresses, or introduces into the conversation, one specific bird.'

By contrast, the common English *er* is a small, chirruping bird of hesitation; never too far from error – think of Alexander Pope's 'To err is human, to forgive, divine.' Not that the spoken filler *er* should only be associated with mistakes or ineptness. It can also be part of the sound of a sentence under construction, a kind of buffering that we now know from streaming audio, as the system stalls to make room for the amount of data being supplied.

Both English and Dutch *ers* tell of a language of parts that are not quite language; ambivalent fragments of signs, gestures and sounds that make up the messages we send, or leave for each other. We like to imagine, in simpler times, that our voices used to only say *here I am* – that they didn't live on in a delayed reflection somewhere else. But for a language that exists for us to make distorted claims about our own presence – me here writing this, you there reading it – the voice is no different. The intimacy of a connection to a body or a place has been undone. As a famous phrase of Gertrude Stein's reminds us, there is no there there. Or no *er* there.

The writer Allan Weiss imagined a software programme that after analyzing sound patterns in a vocal recording could build it back as an artificial voice able to speak any text entered via a keyboard. Weiss says he thought this was a great sci-fi plot device until he found that the programme had almost been perfected already. Who, he asks, would you choose to leave your outgoing answer-machine message? *Barbara Visser is er niet* is something Gertrude Stein might also have had a voice for.

A deceptively machine-like repetition is typical of Stein's low-resolution, incantatory language. John Ashberry once described it as being "made up almost entirely of colourless connecting words" like *here, there, where* and *were* – and suggested that Stein was able to transmit a different picture of reality by imitating its rhythms rather than its content. She talked of capturing the sound of the voice in writing, as well as the impact of mass-media on speech, and her work is somehow faithful to the confusion of these things. Heard on recordings, for example, Stein speaks her words with the same unflinchingly fixed-form that printing gives them. In print, her written sentences adopt the grammatical incompleteness of aphasic language.

Dutch and English *ers* also tell us certain things about speech and writing, their differences as well as how they accommodate each other. The Dutch *er* is an example of something that writing has problems with, when the meaning relies on the situation. So-called *deictic* expressions (*from the Greek word for pointing*) such as Grondelaers' *this bird here*, or *that bird over there*, work more easily in conversational speech where they can be combined with gestural exchanges. The English spoken *er* is thought of as a phonemic gap in meaningful discourse – linguists refer to it as a "neutral vowel sound" as if it were not accountable for anything.

On the other hand, the "colourless connectors" (like the Dutch *er*), as well as, in speech, the filler-pauses (the English *er*), the *disfluencies*, are thought to be a key to fluency in any spoken language. In multi-lingual societies, the formal distinctions that are supposed to separate how we talk from how we write are often abandoned. Words disappear into the language, somewhere between speech and writing.

A translation of Stein's *there is no there there – er zijn daar daar geen* – recognizes in the first *there* a difference that the *er* word is happy to provide, even if Stein may have preferred the ambiguous tone of all *there's* being equal. Or, given the autobiographical context of her phrase, a language that emerges like a mirage from the remains of a place or person that has changed beyond recognition. *There* for Gertrude Stein, whether it was any longer there or not, was her childhood home, a house on the corner of Thirteenth Avenue and Twenty-fifth street in East Oakland during the 1880's: "it was shabby and overgrown the houses were certainly some of those that had been (...) yes it might have been Thirteenth Avenue where I had been."

Many of the forms that language can take are never easy to translate, or, in some cases, even identify. Often more like a trick of the light, a shift in the wind. Or a change in location (and locution); ways of saying *I'm not there anymore*. Just as languages have different ways of conveying past, present and future tense, technology also carries inflections that can put us in and out of the world around us, in and out of ourselves. Describing an early part of his life in the city of Istanbul – his birth, no less – Orhan Pamuk pauses to add *or so I've been told*. “In Turkish” he explains, “we have a special tense that allows us to distinguish hearsay from what we've seen with our own eyes; when we are relating dreams, fairy tales, or past events we could not have witnessed, we use this tense. I'd have liked to write my entire story this way – as if my life were something that happened to someone else, as if it were a dream in which I felt my voice fading...”

This way of ‘remembering’ is an important part of the social structure of language – an everyday sense of things based on the perceptions of others *and* the ghost voices of technology recurring inside us. Not only is it because he's a writer does Pamuk find, in this tense of his language, a temptation to talk about himself as if he were someone else, somewhere else. As if, effaced by their own words, their own voice, the person telling the story is no longer there. *Is er niet*. Anyone who ever left an outgoing message on an answer machine can tell you as much about that.