How to write a conference abstract: a five-part plan for pitching your research at almost anything

This is an abstract I wrote in 2012, based on work from my postdoctoral project on translation/interpreting and peacekeeping in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for submission to a set of Feminist Security Studies panels at the International Studies Association conference in 2013. I'd been realising that my research about everyday intercultural encounters on military bases actually fitted in with what this expanding field of International Relations was doing, so I needed to emphasise topics that field was talking about (peace support operations) and concepts and approaches that the organisers would recognise as relevant (power and, since this was a feminist strand, above all gender).

Here's the abstract, and then we'll go through how each part works:

Gender, translation/interpreting, and the exercise of power in peace support operations

Dr Catherine Baker, University of Hull
cbakertw1@googlemail.com

Ethnographic perspectives on peace support operations invite us to view their activities, and thus their exercise of power, as constituted by multiple acts of written and spoken communication between agents of foreign intervention and local people and institutions within the sites of intervention (Pouligny, 2006; Rubinstein, 2008; Higate and Henry, 2009). Yet since most military personnel in most interventions rarely speak the language(s) of their destination, this power rests in fact on multiple acts of translation and interpreting. To fully understand this dimension of international security we must therefore understand the experiences and positionalities of language intermediaries, not just of foreign military actors. Reflecting on 52 semi-structured interviews with foreign soldiers and locally-recruited interpreters collected during a project on peace operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, this paper suggests ways in which language and translation/identity are embodied, exploring nationality, ethnicity, military/civilian status and, primarily, gender. How did the discursive gendering of language and translation/interpreting structure recruitment and employment practices for language intermediaries? How did male interpreters negotiate the feminisation of their role? And how did the feminisation of translation/interpreting intersect with what has been perceived (with problematic essentialism) as a wider conceptual feminisation of contemporary militaries through peace support?

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Catherine Baker
Start with the current state of knowledge – what do we know (where 'we' = audience in field the conference is in)

Catherine Baker
BUT: something is WRONG with what we think we know

Catherine Baker
Next: This is what's missing! And this paper is going to show why.

Catherine Baker
Next: methodology – what/how/why (to show the conclusions will be rigorous)

Catherine Baker
End: hypothesis or conclusion (depending on what stage the research is at) – what do you expect to find / what did you find

Try and add a more emphatic final statement re how this research will change the part of the field you have seen that it could change, compared to what I managed here ☺

Let's take each of those sections in turn.

Step 1: start with the current state of knowledge in the field you're engaging with. What do we think we know? (What you put here is also a bit of a performance of who you think 'we' are, for the purposes of joining this conversation.)

Ethnographic perspectives on peace support operations invite us to view their activities, and thus their exercise of power, as constituted by multiple acts of written and spoken communication between agents of foreign intervention and local people and institutions within the sites of intervention (Pouligny, 2006; Rubinstein, 2008; Higate and Henry, 2009).

Here I'm making a point that had already been well established by recent literature on peacekeeping and peacebuilding: all these operations achieve what they achieve because they happen on an everyday level, and all these interactions are made up of acts of communication.

I've even referred to some recent academic works that have contributed to showing that. I cite them in a way that suggests I'm familiar with them and I think the organisers and audience will be too – don't overuse this, but it's another way to signal that this presentation would be contributing to a conversation that's already going on. (And yes, I've used author-date referencing; sorry, humanities. Footnotes in conference abstracts don't work well.[1])

I could add a first line with a really eye-catching detail that expresses the point I'm making as Step 1, but either I couldn't pick one or the word limit was too short, so…

Step 2: move the narrative *forward*: something is *WRONG* with what we think we know.

Yet since most military personnel in most interventions rarely speak the language(s) of their destination, this power rests in fact on multiple acts of translation and interpreting.

All this (brilliant, valuable) work on the everyday politics of peacekeeping has missed something super important: language, translation and interpreting. (Words like 'yet' and 'in fact' are your signals here for showing that the argument is changing course.)

Suddenly we have a *problem* that needs *solving*. Narrative tension!

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Luckily, someone's just done some research about that…

Step 3: offering a solution.

To fully understand this dimension of international security we must therefore understand the experiences and positionalities of language intermediaries, not just of foreign military actors.

Here, I'm pointing to what I think can resolve the problem: accounting for language intermediaries (translators and interpreters) as well as foreign peacekeepers themselves. It isn't perfect (for one thing, there's a clunky repetition that I should have caught), but in using phrases like 'to fully understand…' it signals that it's about what we can do to overcome whatever Step 2 is. The narrative moves forward again.

I'm benefiting in this particular Step 3 from having two feet in different disciplines. There's a well-known idea in Translation Studies of 'the invisibility of the translator' (thanks, Lawrence Venuti), which had motivated not just me but also the senior academics who designed the project to research language intermediaries in war and conflict in the first place. Taken into other settings where people don't talk about the invisibility of the translator so much, it's one of those ideas that can stop people and make them say 'oh, of course' – which is exactly the kind of feedback I got after I gave this talk.

Even if your research doesn't have this kind of background, though, there's still something about the concepts, theory or literature that you use which will help cut through the problem you posed in Step 2 – and that's part of what makes your research original.

(Remember that you're much more used to the material you draw on most closely than most of your audience will be – what seems to go without saying for you now you've been reading about it for months or years can seem much more original to an audience who hasn't.)

So what are we going to do about this? The next step tells them.

Step 4: methodology. What did you do (or what will you have done by the time the presentation happens) to solve the problem like you said you would?

Reflecting on 52 semi-structured interviews with foreign soldiers and locally-recruited interpreters collected during a project on peace operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina,

This is where your research volunteers as tribute. Summarising your methodology (was it interview-based? archival? creative? quantitative? What sources and data did you use?) shows that the findings from the research will be rigorous, and produce the kind of knowledge that the audience expects – or maybe the kind of knowledge that the audience *doesn't* expect, because their methodologies have been too limited all along as well.

This was quite familiar methodology for my audience, so I didn't spend much time on it – really just to specify the size of my collection of material, and something of the scope.

If you're doing something unconventional with methodology, like Saara Sarma who uses collages of internet images to expand the boundaries of how International Relations experts think about world politics, you'll want to spend relatively longer here. It'll need more explanation, but it's also one of your biggest selling points, so make sure you're telling a

strong story about that throughout the abstract: it'll grab the organisers' attention, but they'll also want to know how the innovative thing you're doing fits into or changes something about a field that doesn't normally do that, and if you don't make this clear you're depending on how well or willing they'll be to extrapolate from what they are able to see.

This may well be the hardest part of the abstract to write if the conference is many months away. Don't worry if some things about your methods, sources or data change between now and then; conference audiences are used to that, and explaining why that happened can often become part of the talk.

By now the narrative's really moving along. There was a problem; you Did The Thing; and now we're somewhere different than we were before.

Step 5: *RESOLUTION*. We got there!

this paper suggests ways in which language and translation/identity are embodied, exploring nationality, ethnicity, military/civilian status and, primarily, gender. How did the discursive gendering of language and translation/interpreting structure recruitment and employment practices for language intermediaries? How did male interpreters negotiate the feminisation of their role? And how did the feminisation of translation/interpreting intersect with what has been perceived (with problematic essentialism) as a wider conceptual feminisation of contemporary militaries through peace support?

This is your hypothesis or conclusion, depending on what stage the research is at – either what you expect to find, or what you found. Frame it in a way which shows the reader what you're contributing, in a way that resonates with what already matters to them because of what field they're in.

Here, for instance, I've made some suggestions why gendered perceptions of translation and interpreting could tell us something about wider issues feminists and International Relations researchers would be interested in (gender inequalities in employment and the military; experiences of men working in jobs that are usually gendered feminine; an ongoing debate about how far peacekeeping might have been changing the gender politics of international security itself).

This part could have been a lot better: it ought to end in a more emphatic sentence, rather than a question, about how this research will change the part of the field you've seen that it could change. It still did enough to get the abstract accepted, because Steps 1 to 4 had made a compelling and original case – and it also gave me the basic structure for my talk.

You can use this structure to pitch almost any piece of research for almost any conference – once you've worked out what story it can tell.

[1] Unless, of course, you're writing an abstract in a field where you've already seen a lot of other conference abstracts that look like that.