



Translation Talk

Interviews conducted by students in the M.A.
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RAINER KLETT

Rainer Klett is an English>German translator based in Seattle, Washington. Born and raised in Tübingen, Germany, he is a native German speaker, and he holds dual Masters degrees in Art History and English with a specialization in American Studies. His experience with translation includes voice-overs, corporate translations, and interpretation. Companies he has worked for include Amazon, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Netflix.

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What is your background? How did you become interested in Translation?

Initially, I wanted to work in a museum, because of my love for Art History. I held a position at the Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art. My first translation assignments were to translate brochures and floor plans for various museums, which led to voice-overs for museum tours. I really enjoyed the work because I was able to be involved with Art History, which I think is really interesting. That led to further translation projects, and I branched out to where I am today. Overall, I've just always enjoyed languages and the nuances that matter in choosing the right word.

I saw on your website that you do conference interpretation and voice-overs as well as written translation. What would you say you work on most often?

Right now, I'd say I do about 80% translation work, 20% voice overs, and maybe 2% interpreting. The percentage of interpreting has changed over time. About 15 years ago, I would have said 20% interpreting, but more and more Germans speak good English and the need for interpreters is going down. There are 2 German interpreters in all of Seattle, including me, and I'd say we each get maybe one interpreting assignment per month. Most of that is at the children's hospital, because children don't always have good command of the language yet.

The problem is that in order to be a good interpreter, you really need to practice. Interpreting requires exceptional short-term memory as well as a fluid command over language. Court interpreting is mostly consecutive translation, which means



the translator begins their translation after the person has finished speaking. People will sometimes throw names at you you've never heard or launch into a lengthy description of directions and street names that you have to remember and repeat. Simultaneous translation requires speed and more immediate recall of information. It is hard because you cannot get stuck and miss words that people are saying. In German it can be difficult when sentences are grammatically structured so you have to wait for the verb at the end of the sentence before you start to speak.

I actually don't accept every offered interpreting assignment anymore, because they come so few and far between that I don't have enough opportunity to practice, and it is important when translating to know that you have the ability to deliver quality work. It is crucial to be able to deliver the information correctly. Sometimes when a German interpreter is needed for something very specific, such as a deposition in a patent infringement case, companies will fly someone in, because there are so few people who actually focus on German interpretation.

Most of my steady translation work comes from translating documents for companies that need to operate in multiple countries. That is sometimes less glamorous, but it is consistent work and it pays.

I love doing voice-overs. I have a studio set up in my home where I can record audio without an echo. One of the companies I work for, Acoustiguide, does recorded tours of museums and tourist attractions, so it's nice to remain engaged in that. Sometimes they just want me to translate the script for someone else to read, but it's fun when I get to act as the professional voice talent.

How has your work changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

COVID has really changed things because it has impacted the economy in general. Back in March when the pandemic first started, my workload shrank to about 20% of what it usually is, because companies froze. It is now back up to more normal levels, but like other freelance work, being a freelance translator follows the economy. My work environment has not changed much because of the pandemic. As a freelancer in translation, I do a lot of work at home anyway. A lot of recording nowadays is also done remotely rather than in recording studios. However, there is almost no in-person interpreting work these days because people are no longer meeting in person.

What is the most challenging aspect of your job? The most interesting?

I love transcreation projects. Those are the projects where it is important to translate meaning into the target culture, rather than focusing only on the content. It requires an in-depth knowledge of both cultures because the source text needs to be translated to read in a way that is natural for a reader in the translation language. You often get



paid by the hour for that type of work, because it is so much more challenging and requires diligent wordsmithing compared to a literal translation.

Do you often work with other translators?

Yes, I work in teams with other translators a lot, on almost any project. We typically divide into three roles. First one person is the actual translator, then another person is an editor, and then sometimes we have a proofreader follow up after that.

What are some projects you are working on right now?

A project I just finished the other day was for Apple's online knowledge base. I am part of the German team for a large agency that handles the Apple account. Luckily, the work they send is pretty steady.

I also just translated a privacy statement for a big corporation for their website. It's a lot of fine print legal stuff, which is very important for the company, but rather tedious to translate.

One that is a bit more interesting is translating titles and taglines for online-advertisement. This has a lot to do with formatting as well, and it involves some creativity. The taglines need to communicate the meaning but also have a character limitation of no more than 40 characters or the formatting of the website doesn't work out. German typically uses more characters than English to say the same thing, so I have to think carefully about how I could rephrase the message.

I was recently asked to translate a Death Certificate. The pdf they sent me had some small print that was blurry and difficult to read. I am very glad I read it through carefully before I accepted the project, because I would not have been able to translate it. I emailed the client to ask for a clearer version, and they sent me the original copy. It was in a format that could also be downloaded into CAT software, which made it a lot easier to work with.

That's something I would recommend. Always read through your source text thoroughly before you respond to a client, and ask for the original text if they send a pdf. It is important to work with your client and be transparent about what you need. Ultimately, the client is your friend. If there's something easy they can do to clarify the task or make it easier for you, such as sending the original copy, ask them to. They usually appreciate you asking, because then you can do a better job.

If you had to describe a day in the life of a translator, what would it include?

It really depends on the day and what I am working on right then.



I use translation software a lot. The main tool I use every day is memoQ. I am used to thinking of the work of a human translator as significantly superior to anything a machine could translate. However, machine translation has become so good, just in the past couple of months, that it is kind of scary. Machines just get better and better. Now I sometimes get the pre-translated version of a text, plug it into the software, and edit the results. Typically, a translator can translate 2,000 to 3,000 words a day, depending on the difficulty of the text. With machine translation, I can translate 2,500 words in three hours.

Do you think machine translation will eventually replace human translators?

No, and I think some of the work I'm doing now is a good example of that. Even though the machine translation can help speed up translation and produce a reasonable first draft, we will always need translators to read through and edit the document.

What is one of the most important things you have learned during your experience as a translator or interpreter?

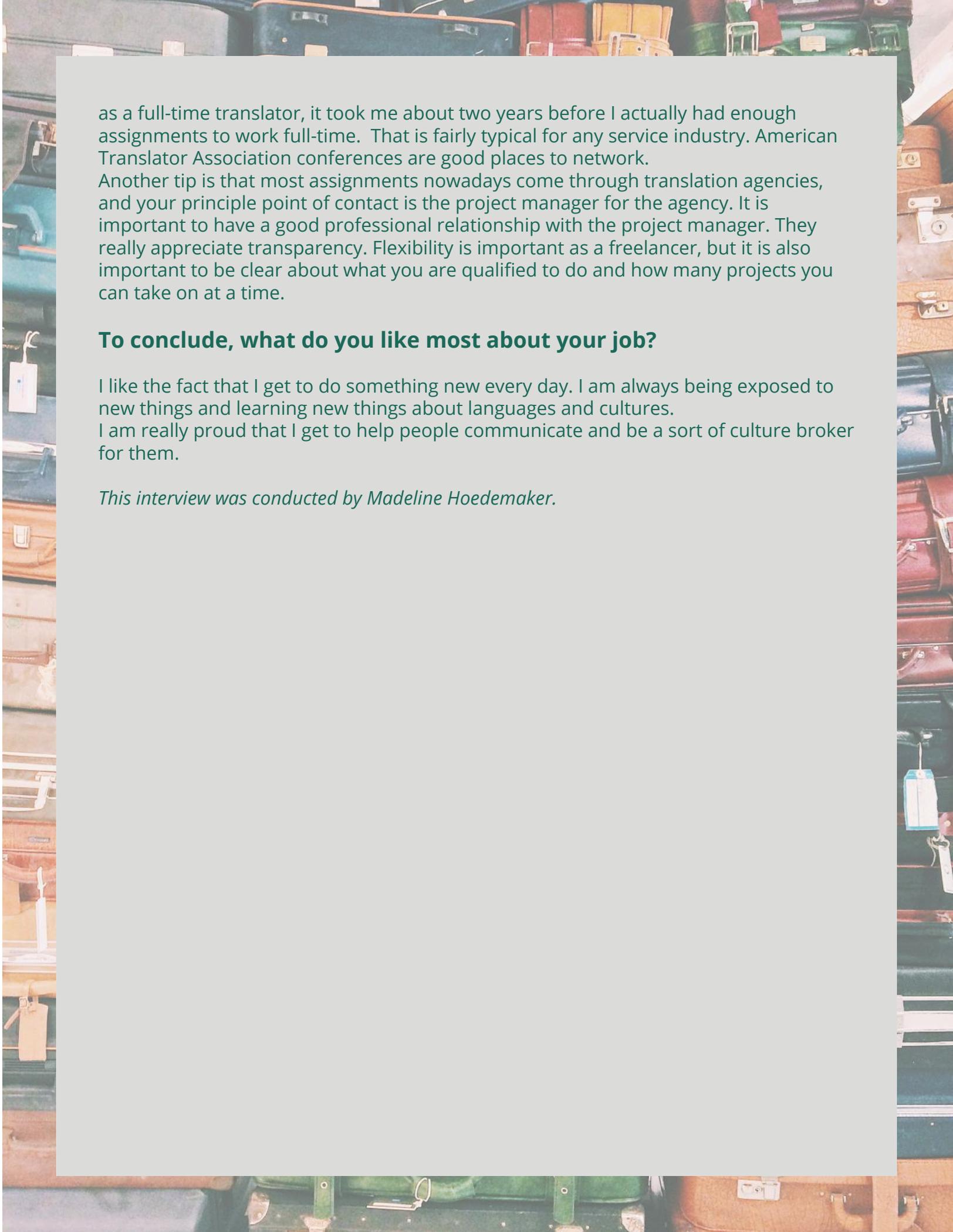
That's an interesting question. How I see my job over the years has changed. Often, we do not just translate words, we translate meaning. I mentioned that one of the most enjoyable aspects of my job is transcreation, when I do not just have to translate the content, but also frame it in a way that makes sense and conveys meaning in the target language and culture.

Do you have any advice for aspiring translators or translators who are new to the field?

Experience and personal connections and referrals are very important when people hire a translator. It is a bit of a Catch 22- you need to already have experience in order to get the job which would give you experience. How do you get started? A lot of people get their first assignment through a connection or by chance. For me it was through the museum of art history. They needed someone to translate some brochures, and since I spoke German, I volunteered. My advice would be to do a very good job on the first few assignments that you get as a translator, because then clients will come back to you. Referrals get you business.

I also think a lot of aspiring translators enter the field assuming they will have to be good at everything and know about a wide variety of topics. It is actually better if you specialize. Typically, if someone needs to have something translated with a particular subject matter, they will find you. For example, if someone wants a technical document translated, they would prefer to hire someone who specializes and has a background in that field than someone who has shallow experience in a wide variety of areas.

It takes a while to establish that network though. Once I decided I wanted to work



as a full-time translator, it took me about two years before I actually had enough assignments to work full-time. That is fairly typical for any service industry. American Translator Association conferences are good places to network.

Another tip is that most assignments nowadays come through translation agencies, and your principle point of contact is the project manager for the agency. It is important to have a good professional relationship with the project manager. They really appreciate transparency. Flexibility is important as a freelancer, but it is also important to be clear about what you are qualified to do and how many projects you can take on at a time.

To conclude, what do you like most about your job?

I like the fact that I get to do something new every day. I am always being exposed to new things and learning new things about languages and cultures.

I am really proud that I get to help people communicate and be a sort of culture broker for them.

This interview was conducted by Madeline Hoedemaker.