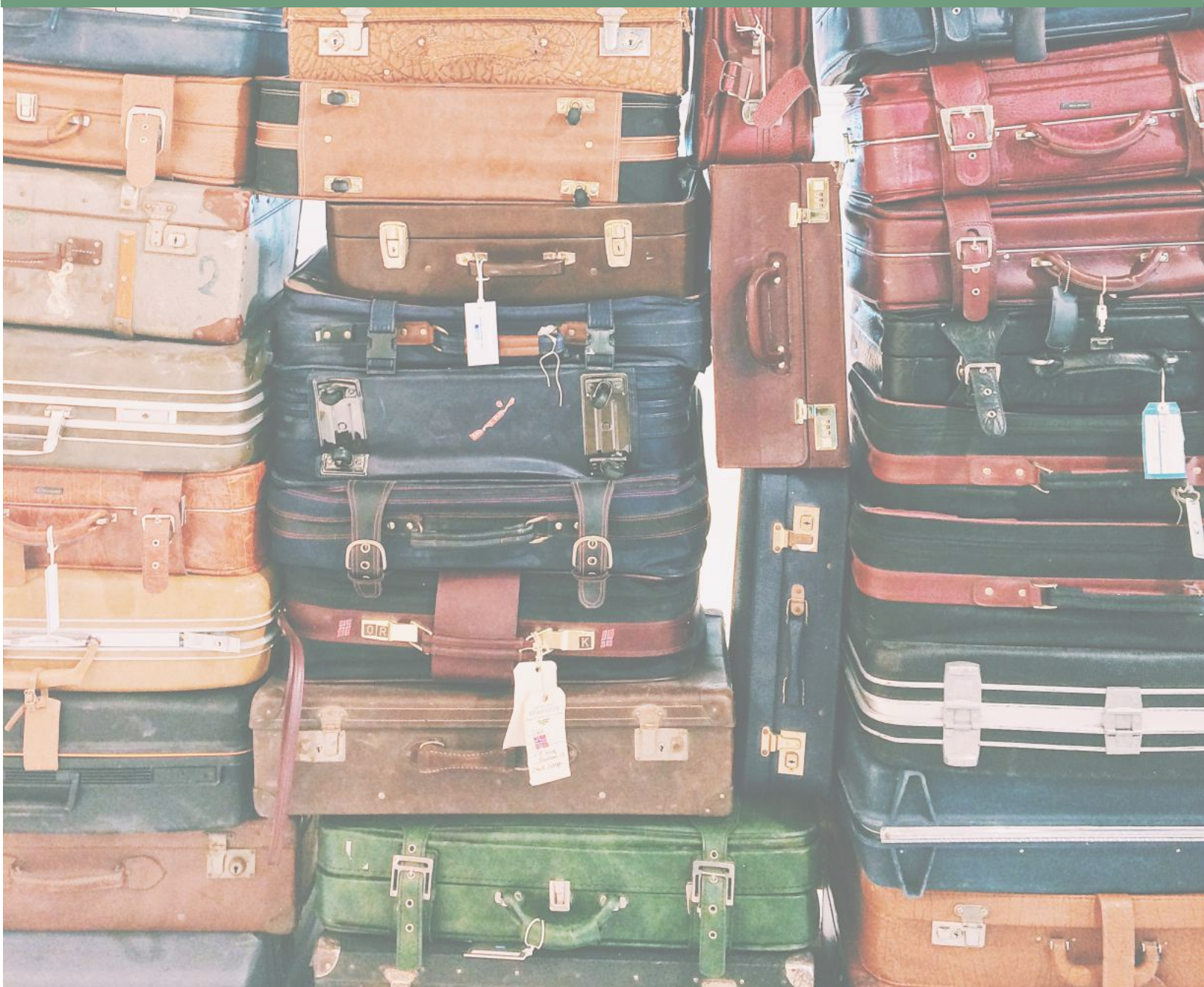




# Translation Talk

Interviews conducted by students in the M.A.  
in Global Communication & Applied Translation Program.  
Fall 2020



# KELLEY D. SALAS

Kelley D. Salas is a court interpreter and freelance translator from Spanish. She has an American Translator Association (ATA) certification in Spanish>English. She also holds a translation certificate from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She was a bilingual teacher in English and Spanish for over a decade and also served as the Director of Communications of the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association before pursuing translation and interpretation full-time. She is a certified court interpreter and has done medical, journalistic, educational, and literary translation work. Her literary projects include middle grade and young adult novels and a graphic novel excerpt. She resides in Milwaukee.

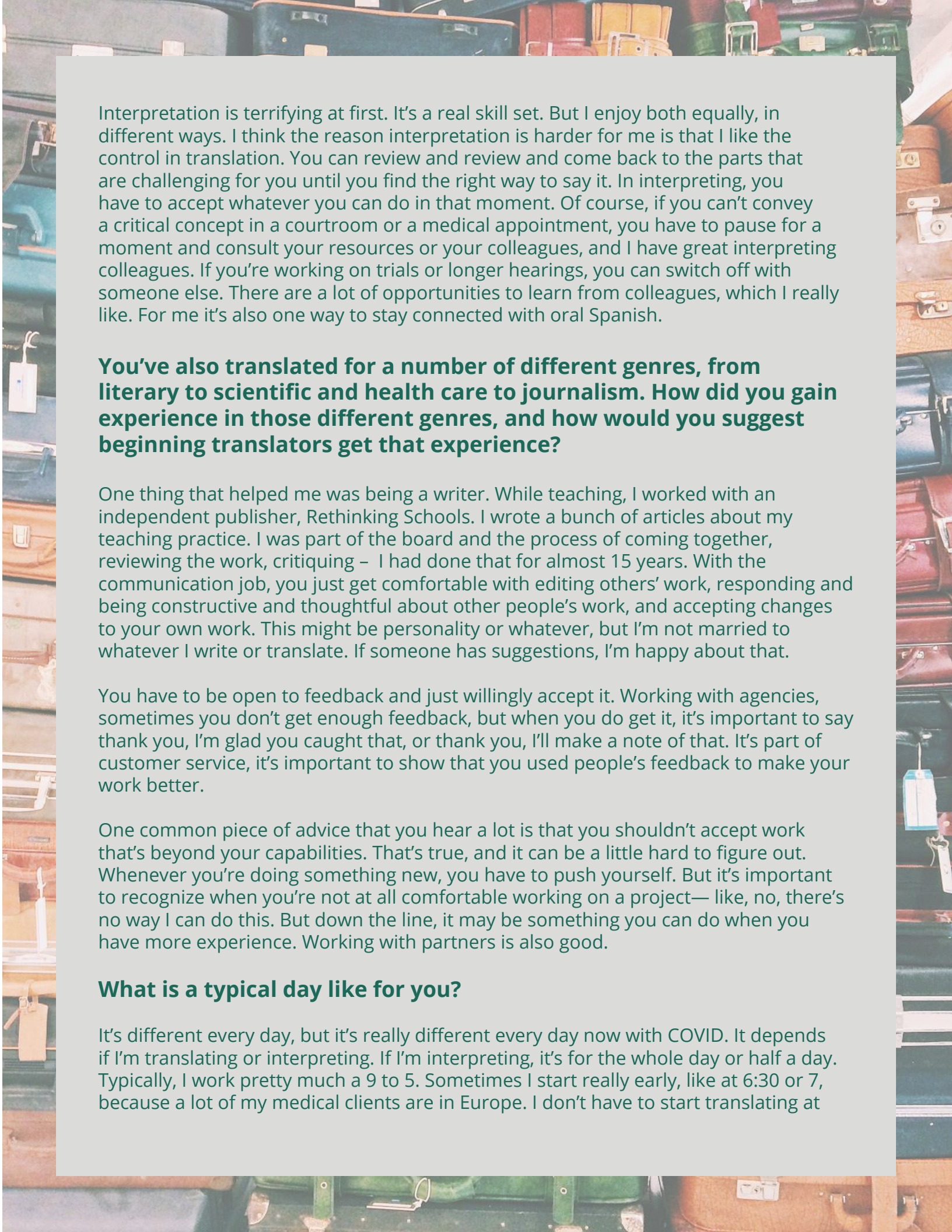


**How did you become interested in learning Spanish/languages? Did you always know you wanted to be a translator, or did you originally have interest in something else?**

I was always interested in languages. I took some French in college, also Italian, which I loved. Finally, in my senior year of college, I took intensive Spanish in the University of Michigan Residential College. It dawned on me that Spanish would be the most useful language to know in the US. I did some travel and studied and lived in Guatemala to work on my fluency. After that was when I started teaching in the Milwaukee Public Schools.

When my kids were babies and I was on leave from my teaching job I started studying toward my graduate certificate in translation. I did it at first to maintain my Spanish, but then I really just loved it. I mostly focused on translation, but I also took interpreting and did an internship as a hospital interpreter. I went back to teaching, then left my teaching job to be a freelance translator, and then my union recruited me to be communications director. That was a great preparation for translation: writing every day on tight deadlines. That's how the commercial translation world is. After that I was a freelance translator. I've translated for agencies and direct clients, and I'm getting into book translation and literary translation.

**You're an interpreter and a translator. What is it like for you to go back and forth between both? Is there one you find more satisfying than the other, or does it depend on the project? Interpretation seems terrifying to me, but everyone is different.**



Interpretation is terrifying at first. It's a real skill set. But I enjoy both equally, in different ways. I think the reason interpretation is harder for me is that I like the control in translation. You can review and review and come back to the parts that are challenging for you until you find the right way to say it. In interpreting, you have to accept whatever you can do in that moment. Of course, if you can't convey a critical concept in a courtroom or a medical appointment, you have to pause for a moment and consult your resources or your colleagues, and I have great interpreting colleagues. If you're working on trials or longer hearings, you can switch off with someone else. There are a lot of opportunities to learn from colleagues, which I really like. For me it's also one way to stay connected with oral Spanish.

**You've also translated for a number of different genres, from literary to scientific and health care to journalism. How did you gain experience in those different genres, and how would you suggest beginning translators get that experience?**

One thing that helped me was being a writer. While teaching, I worked with an independent publisher, Rethinking Schools. I wrote a bunch of articles about my teaching practice. I was part of the board and the process of coming together, reviewing the work, critiquing – I had done that for almost 15 years. With the communication job, you just get comfortable with editing others' work, responding and being constructive and thoughtful about other people's work, and accepting changes to your own work. This might be personality or whatever, but I'm not married to whatever I write or translate. If someone has suggestions, I'm happy about that.

You have to be open to feedback and just willingly accept it. Working with agencies, sometimes you don't get enough feedback, but when you do get it, it's important to say thank you, I'm glad you caught that, or thank you, I'll make a note of that. It's part of customer service, it's important to show that you used people's feedback to make your work better.

One common piece of advice that you hear a lot is that you shouldn't accept work that's beyond your capabilities. That's true, and it can be a little hard to figure out. Whenever you're doing something new, you have to push yourself. But it's important to recognize when you're not at all comfortable working on a project— like, no, there's no way I can do this. But down the line, it may be something you can do when you have more experience. Working with partners is also good.

**What is a typical day like for you?**

It's different every day, but it's really different every day now with COVID. It depends if I'm translating or interpreting. If I'm interpreting, it's for the whole day or half a day. Typically, I work pretty much a 9 to 5. Sometimes I start really early, like at 6:30 or 7, because a lot of my medical clients are in Europe. I don't have to start translating at

6:30 or 7 in the morning, but if I don't check my email early, it's hard to get jobs. I take a lunch break and then work the rest of the afternoon. Sometimes I work till 6, or only till 4.

### **What is something you wish you knew as a beginning translator?**

I wish I had known more ways to collaborate with people. At the ATA conference this year, there were some really good workshops on working as a translation team. I wish I had known more about that, and about the publishing industry and literary translation. If I could go back, I also think I would try to cultivate higher-end, better-paying clients from the beginning – but you have to start somewhere.

### **Would you recommend getting ATA certified/becoming a member? How difficult is it?**

It is expensive to get certified and to maintain your certification, but to me it's definitely been worth it. For the ATA, you have to be a member to maintain your certification. I get a lot out of the membership, so I don't think of it as paying to maintain the certification. If you're going to consider taking the certification test, I would definitely first take the practice tests that the ATA offers. They send you the exam and you should simulate the conditions which you're going to be taking it under. Then you send your work in, and they give you a scoring sheet, and you see everything that they look at when they're grading your actual test. Ultimately, I would like to try to get certified from English to Spanish, though I would always work with a native Spanish-speaking partner.

I have found it really valuable in commercial translation and negotiating for higher rates. I also have heard some people say that for literary translation, it's not as important.

### **What was your ATA mentorship like?**

You can do an ATA mentorship once in your lifetime. It's free if you're a member, and it's not supposed to be structured around actual translation projects, or language-specific. They let you set it up with your own goals. I had a mentorship for literary translation. One of my goals was to get a piece published in an online magazine or journal. My mentor referred me to an editor, and I got my first translation published—and I was paid for it, which was great. A few months after that I pitched a different translation, an excerpt of a graphic novel, at the conference of the American Literary Translators Association [ALTA]. It was accepted and published by Words Without Borders. This past fall at the ALTA conference, I pitched a nonfiction book, and one of the editors I pitched to hired me to create a sample translation of the book.

*This interview was conducted by Emma Jones.*