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Translation and the Second Language Learner: Examining English Language Usage among Students of Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria



Uche Ken Chukwu*

Directorate Of General Studies, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

Email: chukwuketh@yahoo.com



Ebere. N. Onuoha

Directorate Of General Studies, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

Email: ebere.onuoha.eo@gmail.co



Iruka. M. Duru

Directorate Of General Studies, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

Email: irukaduru@gmail.com



Gloria. C. Iroagba

Directorate Of General Studies, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

Email: gloriouscharmz@gmail.com



*(Corresponding author)

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Abstract

This paper examined, using students of Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria as case study, translation as a significant phenomenon in the Igbo language native speaker's use of English as a second language. The purpose was to identify the manners of such translation, and the possible motivations. A total of two hundred and four (204) students admitted into the School of Health Technology of the University for the 2020/2021 academic year formed the sample population. The method of data collection was purposive as the authors paid particular attention to instances of direct translation as they manifested in the students' discussions and interactions. The students were not subjected to any form of controlled environment, but rather, the authors as lecturers of the selected students engaged in direct observation of the students in their social interactions as well as formal class discussions. The items of expressions extracted as data were subjected to evaluation with the aim of identifying incidences and manner of direct translation from Igbo language structure to the English language structure, as well as their possible sources of motivation. Thus, the method of data analysis was qualitative. The paper adopted the theoretical approach of word-for-word translation or paraphrasing. The findings of the paper include that the affected students think in the source language (SL) before translating their thoughts into the target language (TL). What is experienced as TL structures follows from the SL structures that exist in the mental resources of the students. The paper, therefore, concludes that direct translation can be deceptive to the second language learner because it may not contain obvious instances of structural rule deficiency but can be faulted along functional lane, where it manifests instances of redundancy, and vocabulary deficiency. Consequently, the authors recommend among others that the L2 teacher should extend his/ her teaching efforts towards identifying the possible motivation a student's direct translation in order to guide him or her out of it, especially, the students who may need the language beyond its L2 environment, or beyond mere language of social expression.

Keywords: Translation; Direct translation; Language; Second language; Language learning.

1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The second language learner is usually confronted with challenges in an attempt to improve on his or her proficiency in the target language. One of such challenges is interference, that is, the manifestation of the first language characters in the second language. Confronted with such challenges, sometimes, and depending on the interest and motive of the learner, he or she may make do with the pidgin or other informal varieties, especially where the aim is for social communication. In other cases, especially where the learner needs the language for formal usages, the aspiration stretches to the standard variety, and this correspondingly extends the challenges. One noticeable phenomenon at this latter level is the direct translation of the features of the source language into the target language. Examining features of direct translation in the English language manners of native Igbo language speakers, as well as the possible motivations forms the problem of this paper.

1.2. Research Questions

The paper is guided by the following research questions:

- a. What are the possible challenges faced by the second language learner?
- b. To what extent does a second language learner resort to translation in order to circumvent such problems?
- c. Are there instances of direct translation traceable in the language manners of Igbo second language users of the English language?
- d. What are the possible motivations of such direct translations?

2. Conceptual Review

2.1. Language and Language Dynamism

As a unique form of communication, human language is dynamic, constantly changing according to the social needs of the user(s). The dynamism of human language makes it different from other codes of communication (Yule-Ifode, 2001). Again, human language is replete with rules that can be distinctively identified (Lyons, 1981). These rules are not static, as they are also constantly changing over time and in diverse ways too. Through neologism, borrowing, and other morphological processes, new words are constantly filtering into languages. Conversely, some words and expressions are also going obsolete in languages. Language also gives room for semantic change, a situation where the meaning of linguistic elements change due to various reasons in order to accommodate the changing world. According to Blommart (2014), "language has become reconceptualised as mobile, other than fixed to a particular speech community and secondly, language is no longer seen as a fixed, unified thing, instead, the attention has moved towards language practice and the language resources that people use in communication".

Languages often have different varieties: dialects, idiolects, and registers. Competence in communication, therefore, does not depend on a restricted proficiency, but on a speaker's ability to draw from a wide range of influences to respond to the demands of a communication context.

A variety of the English language known as the Nigerian English, NE, which is spoken and understood by Nigerians has continued to receive scholarly attention. Bemigbo and Olateju (2006), define Nigerian English as "that variety of English that has developed in the Nigerian non-native English situation and it has distinguishing features manifested at the phonological, lexico- semantic, grammatical and discourse levels". Nigerian English, therefore, differs in the kind of meaning it expresses from other 'Englishes'. Perhaps, this definition can be strengthened by Weinrich's assertion cited in Onyema (2002) that interference which is a major influence of English language varieties leads to "a re-arrangement of the English patterns at the levels of phonology and phonetics, morphology and syntax as well as in the vocabulary, culture and discourse". Against this background, Onyema further argues that "Nigerian English can be said to have emerged as a result of Nigerian speakers' familiarity with their mother tongues or first language, and in this connection (as always), familiarity with language includes familiarity with culture" (p.55).

The decoder of any language, as an inferential code, will need a lot of contextual and background knowledge in order to make meaning out of what is being said (Onuigbo, 2007). Equally, speakers of a language should have a robust vocabulary resource in order to effectively communicate thoughts and meanings. That is to say that language responds to both social and cultural contexts (Geortz, 1975).

Sadly, the vocabularies of indigenous Nigerian languages, for instance the Igbo language, are not enough to match with contemporary realities of the people, and so may not easily satisfy the communicative needs of their speakers, hence the resort to English for help. Notably also, the multilingual nature of the country has greatly aided the indispensable position of the English language. Consequently, when these speakers resort to the English language, they often encounter difficulty and this leads to issues such as pidgin, code-mixing and code-switching, and literal translation. The first two are usually consciously avoided in academic and other formal settings because they are branded informal with uneducated characteristics. Unfortunately, in an attempt to achieve the supposed formal variety, many users find themselves in the latter. The focus of this paper is on the phenomenon of translation and its significance in the language use of Federal University of Technology Owerri students.

2.2. Translation

Translation is a major feature in the transfer of information from one linguistic code to another. Crystal (1991) explains that translation involves a process where meaning and expression in one language (source) is tuned with the meaning of another (target) whether the medium is spoken, written or signed. The act of translation lays emphasis on

differences between people, their languages and cultures. To buttress this, [Torop \(2002\)](#), has argued that translation as a process which involves conversion of ideas expressed in one language into another is enshrined in the socio-cultural language of a particular context. According to Torop, translation is a process of boundary-crossing between two separate languages. [Greene and Coulson \(1995\)](#), in a seeming agreement with Torop, note that a researcher needs to be aware of, and have understanding of the linguistic or social context within which utterances are made while translating.

2.3. Patterns of Translation

Having established the fact that translation is the transfer of meaning from one language (source) to another (target), and that translation is greatly influenced by a people's language and culture, let us consider some of the different patterns of translation.

[Lorsch \(1991\)](#), has noted that translation strategy is "a potentially conscious procedure for the solution of a problem which an individual is faced with when translating a text from one language to another". [Newmark \(1988\)](#) points out the difference between a translation method and a translation procedure. Translation method is applied to the whole text to be translated while translation procedure differs within the same text on a case-by-case basis depending on the particular elements to be translated.

According to the classical taxonomy of translation, [Vinay and Darbelnet \(2000\)](#), note only two methods of translation: the direct or the literal translation, and the oblique translation. They further designate direct or the literal translation into the following procedures:

- Borrowing which is a translation procedure that has to do with the use of same word in the source language found in the target language.
- Calque which involves the coining of new words/ neologisms in the target language by adopting the structures of the source language.
- Literal translation which involves metaphrasing or word-for-word translation that achieves a text which is as correct as it is idiomatic.

The oblique method involves the following procedures:

- Transposition which involves replacing one word class with another without altering the meaning of the text. This brings a change in grammatical structure.
- Modulation which involves changing the form of the text by introducing a semantic change.
- Equivalence which involves using a completely different expression to reformulate and transmit the same reality.
- Adaptation which is a cultural element that changes the original text with one that is more suitable to the culture of the target language. Adaptation is also called cultural substitution or cultural equivalent.

We have narrowed the interest of this paper mainly to literal translation in which the source language word order is retained and the words translated individually into the target language by their most common meanings out of context.

3. Theoretical Framework

Translation has as its major concern, conveying the 'original' meaning of expressions in a different language in order to achieve the equivalence of meanings between two different languages. To achieve this, therefore, a translator has to take the meaning behind the text and insert it into the target language in order to retain the intent of the message. In other words, the translator should be aware of and understand the linguistic or social contexts within which utterances are made ([Greene and Coulson, 1995](#)).

Over the past three decades, translation studies have emerged as a new international and interdisciplinary field in academics. Before now, scholars of translation studies made use of methodologies and frameworks appropriated from other disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, philosophy, communication, literary theory, and more currently, cultural studies ([Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990](#)). During this time, translation studies could be rightly viewed as an interdisciplinary science ([Snell-Hornby, 1995](#)). The distinctive methodologies and theoretical frameworks that proceeded from other disciplines were constantly adjusted and re-appraised so as to provide the demands of translation studies as an essential and independent discipline ([Nauda, 2002](#)).

[Holmes \(1972\)](#) was foremost to come up with a framework for this field and categorized it into two key areas: translation as theory; as well as the descriptive science of translation and applied translation studies which focuses on issues such as coaching of translators and the provision of translation aids for translators. Currently, scholars have further advanced different theoretical perspectives from which translation may be studied: linguistic approach, communicative/functional approach, psycholinguistic or cognitive approach, and the polysystem approach. This study anchors specifically on the linguistic approach. The approach focuses on key issues of meaning, equivalence, shift, text purpose and analysis, and discourse register, which can be investigated in the context of structural and functional linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and stylistics. Our paper acknowledges the importance of structural linguistics made prominent in the works of Roman Jakobson, Eugene Nida, Newmark, Koller, Vinay, Darbelnet, Catford, and Van Leuven- Zwart. However, it also recognizes the input of functional linguists such as Halliday, Katharina Reiss, JustaHolz- Manttari, Vermeer, Mona Baker, Hatim, and Mason who posit that the study of language is not just about structure, it is also about how language functions in a given social context, ([Nauda, 2002](#)).

With specific focus on second language learning, this study adopts the theoretical approach of word-for-word translation or metaphrasing to examine how the data implicate a translation from the source language (SL), in this case, Igbo language, to the target language (TL), the English language. Metaphrase is used to denote the exact

reproduction or the literal translation of an author's work from the primary language to a different language. In so doing, the translator aims to keep the translated version as close as possible to the original. So, for the purpose of our paper, it is observed that this method is ideal in the study of the manner of English sentence structuring of some English language users in Nigeria which exhibit a translation from Igbo language meaning and structure to the English language. This assumption is supported in [Karim and Nassaji \(2003\)](#) which argue that there is the possibility of a second language speaker to subconsciously adopt the sentence structure of the L1 for the L2. Although Karim and Nassaji prefer the term "language transfer" to describe this type of translation phenomenon, the base argument is that the process involves a subconscious activity, just as we see in the data analysed in this paper.

3.1. Methodology

The students of Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria, formed the population of the study. The authors selected the University as a case study, believing that language manners of Igbo second language learners of the English language in the University are also possible among other Igbo second language learners of English in other environments. A total of two hundred and four (204) students admitted into the School of Health Technology of the University for the 2020/2021 academic year formed the sample population. This School is randomly selected out of the Schools in the University. The paper adopted the direct observation method in the collection of data. The students were not subjected to any form of controlled environment, rather, the authors as lecturers of the selected students engaged in direct observation of the students in their social interactions as well as formal expressions, both in discussing with lecturers and other staff, and in participating in class discussions. The essence was to allow them use language freely in order to observe their actual language manners. The authors paid keen attention to instances of direct translation as they manifested in their discussions and interactions, thus the sampling technique adopted was purposive. The selected university is located in Igbo language speaking part of the country, where over 80 % of the students speak Igbo as their first or native language and English as second and official language.

Furthermore, items of expressions extracted from these sources were subjected to evaluation with the aim of identifying incidences and manner of direct translation from Igbo language structure to the English language structure, as well as their possible sources of motivation. Thus, the method of data analysis was qualitative.

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1. Data Presentation

Data obtained through direct observation of the students are hereby presented in the table below. The table contains four columns for the following: Serial Number, Target Language TL which is the English language expression as used by the student(s), Source Language SL which is the possible Igbo language version of the expression, and Possible Motivation for the translation.

S/N	ENGLISH LANGUAGE (TL)	IGBO LANGUAGE (SL)	POSSIBLE MOTIVATION
A	I am going to go there tomorrow	<i>Aga m aga ebe ahu echi</i>	Structural intrusion/redundancy
B	I use leg to come to school every day	<i>A na m eji ukwu abia akwukwo ubochi nile</i>	Vocabulary deficiency/structural redundancy
C	Come and go to his office immediately	<i>Bia gaa na ofis ya ososo</i>	Structural intrusion/ redundancy
D	Please help us put mouth in this matter	<i>Biko nyere anyi aka tinye onu na okwu a</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
E	I did not follow them to make noise	<i>Esogim ha mee mkpotu</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
F	My sister has taken in	<i>Nwannem nwanyi adi la ime</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
G	She is my cousin sister	<i>Obu nwannem nwanyi</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
H	My hand is not in that matter	<i>Aka m adighi na okwu ahu</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
I	I am coming	<i>Ana m abia</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
J	Time is going	<i>Oge na aga</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
K	My stomach is paining me	<i>Afo na ara m ahu</i>	Vocabulary deficiency
L	Driver, I will come down here	<i>Okwo ugbo, agam alotu ebe a</i>	Vocabulary deficiency

4.2. Data Analysis

In our analysis, we used the conventional font for the TL (English) and italics for the SL (Igbo). So for every sample, both the TL and the SL versions are placed side by side. Again, under every sample, there is a description of the manner and motivation of translation.

4.2.1. I Am Going to Go There Tomorrow *Aga M Aga Ebe Ahu Echi*

The infinitive "to go" is redundant in the English version of this sample. The sentence can stand as "I am going there tomorrow" or "I will go there tomorrow" depending on the user's choice of tense and mood. In the first, "am" is the primary auxiliary that indicates the tense, and "going" is the non-finite form. In the latter, "will" is the modal auxiliary indicating tense, while "go" is the lexical verb. Therefore, there is no need for the infinitive form "to go" in the sentence. It is a structural intrusion that is functionally redundant.

On the other hand, in the Igbo version, the first *aga* is the modal auxiliary in the category of "will" or "shall", while the second *aga* is the lexical verb. The *m* after the first *aga* stands for the singular pronoun subject "I". Assuming it is in the plural, it would have been *Anyi ga aga...*, where *Anyi* is "We". Therefore, the translation can still stand where the student had used the Standard English expression "I will go there tomorrow" or "I am going

there tomorrow". So the problem with this sample is that the student transferred (metaphrased) the Igbo (SL) structure which has two *aga* into English (TL).

4.2.2. I Use Leg to Come To School Every Day a Na M Eji Ukwu Abia Akwukwo Ubochi Nile

In the English version of this sample, the phrase "use leg to come" contains redundancy. First, the Standard English expression would have been "I trek to school everyday". Thus, the whole phrase "use leg to come" is captured in one verb "trek". In the Igbo version however, this redundant phrase (use leg to come) is *aji ukwu abia*, and it cannot be substituted by a single verb. So the redundancy exists only in the English version, and as said earlier, the student's fault is that he/she metaphrased the SL structure.

4.2.3. Come and Go To His Office Immediately *Bia Gaa Na Ofis Ya Ososo*

In this sample, the verb "come", and the conjunction "and", are functionally redundant. "Come" denotes imperative just as "go", and both operate as antonyms. The actions implicated in the two verbs cannot go simultaneously. One cannot come and go at the same time. The standard expressions ought to have been "Come to his office immediately" or "Go to his office immediately" depending on the deictic context of the expression. Comparatively, in Igbo, *bia* means "come", and *gaa* means "go". However, the *bia* in the Igbo version of the expression has no structural significance hence the absence of the conjunction *na* (and) to link the two (*Bia na gaa na ofis ya ososo*). This is a strange structure in Igbo. Rather, the *Bia* in our sample expression is better understood as a politeness marker which douses the strong imperative tone in *Gaa na ofis ya ososo*. This latter explanation is obviously strange to English language.

4.2.4. Please Help Us Put Mouth in This Matter *Biko Nyere Anyi Aka Tinye Onu Na Okwu A*

In the English language, "put mouth in a matter" is a strange structure; rather what is known is "contribute in a matter or discussion". But in Igbo, *tinye onu na okwu* is the standard expression. Thus, what the student has done is to directly translate; where *tinye* is "put", *onu* is "mouth", and *okwu a* is "this matter". Note that in Igbo, the demonstrative marker comes after the noun it refers to e.g. *okwu a* (*okwu* as noun, *a* as demonstrative for proximity) *okwu ahu* (*okwu* as noun, *ahu* as demonstrative for farness). Thus, what informed the student(s)' expression is the structural order of the SL owing to vocabulary deficiency.

4.2.5. I Did Not Follow Them to Make Noise *Esogi M Ha Mee Mkpotu*

The English version of this sample sounds strange because "follow" in the context it is used here is strange. 'Follow' presupposes coming behind either in space or time. The standard version of this expression should have been "I did not join them..." to implicate "membership of a group" which the context of the expression expects. But in the Igbo version, *so* could stand for both "follow" and "join". So, it is the inability of the student to differentiate between the two words, (follow and join), that is responsible for the strangeness of the English expression. He/she directly translated the expression from the SL to the TL owing to deficient knowledge of vocabulary.

4.2.6. My Sister Has Taken in *Nwannem Nwanyi Adi La Ime*

The context of this expression is "getting pregnant". So using "take in" to mean getting pregnant is strange to the English language. As a phrasal verb, "taken in" has no connection with "pregnant". On the other hand, in the Igbo language, to be pregnant means *idi ime* which can be literally translated as "take in". So what motivated the direct translation is deficient vocabulary.

4.2.7. She is my Cousin Sister *Obu Nwannem Nwanyi*

English language has provision for all forms of biological relationship where cousin means the child (male or female) of someone's uncle or aunt. Sister on the other hand is a female sibling. Thus one cannot be a cousin as well as sister. But it is not the same in Igbo. *Nwanne* is a general term for a relation. However, it is usually used as a qualifier, expecting a head word that would introduce the gender difference. For example, *nwanne nwoke* is male relation, while *nwanne nwanyi* is female relation. So, for the fact that the Igbo language has no lexical discrimination for the different forms of relation such as cousin, nephew, niece, the student used cousin to mean *nwanne*; and sister to specify the gender, *nwanyị* (girl). Thus, the same way English would say "male cousin" or "female cousin", the student has said "cousin sister", not taking into cognizance that in Standard English expression, a person cannot be a cousin and sister at the same time. What the student has done is a direct translation of the SL to the TL owing to deficiency in vocabulary.

4.2.8. My Hand is Not in Tha Tmatter, *Aka M Adighi Na Okwu Ahu*

The English version of this sample is an expression exonerating self from a matter, which could be said as, "I am not a party to the matter". However, the sample is a direct translation of the Igbo version where *Aka m* is "my hand", *adighi* is "is not", *na* is "in", and *okwu ahu* is "the matter". So, the expression is a metaphor of the SL owing to deficiency in vocabulary.

4.2.9. I Am Coming *Ana m abia*

The context of this sample is request for permission, which could be expressed in different forms in standard expression, except the sample: “Excuse me for a minute” ‘I will be back in a moment’, “I will be back soon” etc. But the sample here is a direct translation of the Igbo version where *Ana m* is “I am” (in the future tense), and *abia* is “coming”. The possible motivation here is deficiency in vocabulary.

4.2.10. Time is Going *Oge na aga*

The context of the sample is a regret that one is getting behind schedule. This expression sounds more of figurative (personification) than the conventional English expressions: We are running behind schedule; We are running behind time; We are getting late etc.

The sample expression emanates from a direct translation where *oge* is “time”, *na* is “is”, and *aga* is “going”. Note that in the Igbo language, *na* can be used as preposition e.g.

Na ulo (in the house), na akpa (in the bag), na ulo akwukwo (in school). And as auxiliary, e.g. .is coming (na abia), came (biara), will come (ga abia) is doing (na eme), done (mere), will be done (ga eme). The possible motivation here is deficiency in vocabulary.

4.2.11. My Stomach is Paining Me *Afo na ara m ahu*

The context of this sample is one expressing that one is experiencing stomach ache or pain. The translation here involves *Afo* (stomach), *na* (is auxiliary), *ara m ahu* (paining me). Notice that in the sample expression, “paining” is used as a transitive verb where “My stomach” is the subject (performing the action, paining), and “me” is the object (receiving action). Thus, the expression separates “My stomach” from the owner “me”. This structural absurdity emanates from the metaphrasing of the SL owing to deficiency in vocabulary.

4.2.12. Driver, I Will Come Down Here *Okwo Ugbo, Agam Alotu Ebe A*

The context of this sample is one informing a cab driver of the intention to alight. The transliteration involves *okwo ugbo* (driver), *agam* (I will), *alotu* (come down) *ebe a* (here). The possible motivation here is deficiency in vocabulary.

5. Summary and Conclusion

So far, we have identified translation as a significant phenomenon in L2 discourse. The paper has also examined direct translation or metaphrasing as it affects translation from the source language to the target language, using the Igbo language and the English language respectively. Having analysed instances of direct translation as extracted from the observed data, the paper comes up with the following conclusions:

- The affected students think in the SL before translating their thoughts into the TL. What is experienced as TL structures follow from the SL structures that exist in mental resource of the student.
- The translation process from the SL to the TL bears manifestations of interference of the SL systems on the TL.
- The observed cases indicate that the expressions may not be deficient structurally, but can be faulted along functional lane where they manifest cases of redundancy, and vocabulary deficiency.
- Vocabulary deficiency constitutes the major motivation for direct translation. The students tried to make up for this deficiency by translating their thought from its native form in the SL to the TL which is the language involved in the expression. The effort is to keep the translated version as close as possible to the original.
- Every language is unique in its system as noticed in the difference between what the SL accepts and what the TL accepts. Generalization of rules will not help a second language learner.
- Context of use plays vital role in language use, both in the expression and understanding.
- The affected students take the expressions as formal since they tend to obey the structural rules of the English language as opposed to pidgin, code-mixing and code-switching which exhibit obvious cases of system rule violation.

This paper has examined how translation manifests in the language manners of a second language learner, using students of Federal University of Technology Owerri as case study. In second language learning and use, direct translation, as an aspect of interference is quite inevitable as the speaker often resorts to the native language or first language in times of difficulty. He or she also makes effort to exhibit proficiency in the use of the target language, by avoiding expressions that suggest obvious instances of deficiency. Evidently, the structure system of every language is peculiar to it. In order not to deviate from the intent of the message, the students in the samples think in the source language and then translate directly into the target language not bothering about the system differences in the two languages.

The paper concludes that direct translation may not produce standard forms in the TL. That an expression does not contain obvious instances of rule deficiency as in pidgin, code-mixing and code-switching does not make it to have conformed to the standard form. Direct translation can sometimes be deceptive to the second language learner.

Recommendations

The paper recommends as follows:

- That direct translation can assist the L2 learner of English language to wriggle out of communication difficulty, as well as make communication more natural. However, it is not all communication contexts that expect direct translation. So the paper recommends that a L2 learner should always consider the context of language use.
- That the L2 teacher should always look out for direct translation in the language manners of the students.
- The L2 teacher should extend efforts towards identifying the possible motivation of such direct translation in order to guide the learner out of it. This recommendation is in line with Headbloom (1979) observation that an L2 learner as an active participator is prone to learner characteristics errors in an attempt to meet his own needs. So such phenomenon as translation is bound to occur, but the major concern of the L2 teacher should be how to resolve it.
- There is need to guide the students who may need the language beyond its L2 environment, or beyond mere language of social expression. This recommendation is in line with Oli Pritchard's submission after studying the use of translation by Spanish L2 learners of English language, that "Of course, Spanish and English are not the same language, so you can't always translate. However, knowing exactly when you can't translate is part of the skill of intelligent and efficient translation" (www.thebogotapost.com).

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