

**THE MYSTERIOUS TASK OF TRANSLATING THE NAMES
OF MYSTERY SUBGENRES:
A PRIVATE EYE INVESTIGATION**

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How would you translate into English the Spanish term “novela negra”? How about “novela policíaca”? If you don’t know much Spanish (or even if you do), you probably guessed that the first term must mean “black novel”, and the second one “police procedural (novel)”, if you are acquainted with this genre. Did you? Let’s try translating from English into Spanish: How would you translate “hard-boiled” novels? How about “soft-boiled”? I don’t know about you, but, to a native Spanish-speaker like me, it sounds like you are talking about eggs! Believe it or not, a “hard-boiled” novel is translated into Spanish as “novela negra”. However, not all “novelas negras” could be translated as “hard-boiled” novels! If you think these translation challenges are hard, this is just the beginning. The meaning of these and other Spanish terms that are used to classify the different mystery subgenres has been changing in the last few decades, and, to make matters worse, it depends on who uses them: regular readers, bookstore owners, librarians, authors, or scholars. Even authors and scholars disagree among themselves!

In addition to the names given to the different mystery and suspense fiction subgenres, there are many other terms related to this genre that pose a challenge to translate, but discussing them as well and still keeping this essay under 2000 words was too daunting a task for me to try. Therefore, this article will be mostly devoted to the translation of the main terms given to the main mystery and suspense

subgenres from English into Spanish and vice versa. However, the lessons we will learn from this task will be profitable and entertaining (I hope!) for translators working in other languages as well.

In the process of explaining the origin, history, and/or meaning of the terms used in English and Spanish to identify some of the mystery subgenres, we will reach the following conclusions regarding the difficult task of translating: 1) that the simple use of dictionaries, even specialized, on many occasions is not sufficient to find out the right translation of literary terms; 2) that a thorough knowledge of the cultures involved in the translation process is indispensable; 3) that the common idea that good translators are capable of translating texts in any field they choose just with an initial, general study of the field is incorrect; 4) that translating texts of literary criticism (and of other subjects that we won't have time or space to discuss here) requires on many occasions, not only a thorough knowledge of its field and terminology, but very specific topical research as well; and 5) that the nomenclature disputes currently existing among literary scholars of the mystery genre could be settled by a homogeneous use of the terms involved, both in English and Spanish. I would like to warn the reader, however, that I don't plan to demonstrate these conclusions in the exact order mentioned. For the sake of space, I will scramble some of them together. I hope they will turn out soft and tasty!

In order to understand the meaning of these related terms, one must know their history. To begin with, the term "novela negra" is incorrectly translated by most online translation websites as "black novel". This egregious translation mistake is easily identifiable, and I bet none of my readers would fall for it, but we can still

learn something from this common type of mistake: literal translations slip through translating programs because the translated word or expression actually exists in the language; the problem resides in that it means something different! Black novel is, in fact, a novel genre, but it refers to novels written by black people.

Spanishdict.com, a popular translation website, furnishes the translation offered by three different programs: Microsoft (“Black novel”), SDL (“The noir novel”), and Prompt (“black novel”). SDL’s translation is the closest one, but it’s still deficient, because that’s not the way this subgenre is referred to in English. Among the translation websites I have checked (I am excluding paid translation software like Trados), Reverso is the only one that offers translations that include, among them, at least acceptable ones. The translations Reverso gives are: crime novel, crime fiction, and black novel. The first two are acceptable, though generic and not exactly accurate. Most scholars prefer to translate “novela negra” as “roman noir” (direct adoption from the French, literally meaning “black novel”) or “noir fiction”.

The common mistranslation of “black novel” for “novela negra” brings up an important principle we always need to apply when we are struggling to translate a word, an expression, or a sentence: “Do we really say it like this? Does this “sound” right?” There are many instances of translations that seem “right” in the literal sense, but sound foreign, or awkward, if you will. For example, sometimes I like to tease my daughters by intentionally misusing English idiomatic expressions. Not too long ago, when I noticed that it was beginning to rain really hard, I exclaimed out loud: “Look! It’s raining dogs and cats!” Immediately, my 11 year-old daughter chimed in and corrected me, innocently remarking: “No, daddy, we say ‘It’s raining

cats and dogs'!" Her funny reaction always makes my wife and me smile. Anyway, the point is that, sometimes, a slight change to an expression may produce a mistranslation. However, the principle I am trying to raise here is that a good translation must be "natural", or, in other words, it must never "sound" awkward, or as if it were translated. This is the advice I give to my students of Spanish: "Beware of literal translations!"

Back to our problematic translation of "novela negra", the irony of borrowing the French term "roman noir" is that this expression had its origin in Marcel Duhamel, a French editor of Gallimard. In 1945, Duhamel started printing French translations of novels recently written in English by the then already famous American hard-boiled fiction writers (like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, for example), and he called this book collection "la Serie Noire." (Galán 62) The French term "roman noir" literally means "black novel". However, before any English-speaking reader reaches a wrong conclusion, I should clarify that the reason for this label is that these novels "appeared in black covers." (Hart 14) They quickly became very popular, and the noir genre spread over the rest of Europe. Some Spanish scholars started calling novels written with this style "novelas negras," even though the book covers were not black.

The Spanish term "novela negra" had its origin, thus, in the French designation, and, initially, like "roman noir", was a perfect translation of "hard-boiled fiction" in the sense that the different denominations referred to the same authors and works. However, years later, the labels "novela negra" and "roman noir" kept being used to refer to novels of similar style and atmosphere produced in

Europe at that time that had departed from the original American “hard-boiled” genre. The meaning of “novela negra” and “roman noir” had broadened, acquiring new characteristics, some of which were unique to the country or culture where this fiction was created. The French epithet gained popularity in the rest of Europe, the US, and many other countries, and would soon generate related subgenres, such as “noir film” and “Scandi noir”, for example. It was at this time that English speakers started using the French term “noir fiction” to refer to the European novels and short stories that had had the American hard-boiled novels as their inspiration.

The recent popularity of Scandinavian noir fiction deserves some special attention. This subgenre became the epitome of noir fiction in 2005 with the publication of Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and, since then, some Scandinavian authors have become worldwide bestsellers. Another widely used term for this subgenre –and the one I would recommend using- is Scandinavian crime fiction. This last designation points to the two main characteristics of this subgenre: the focus on crime and the setting of Scandinavia as the backdrop of its novels. However, the designation “Scandinavian noir fiction/film” hasn’t triggered any major dissensions among critics, and seems to be sticking among literary and journalistic circles, so it’s probably going to stay.

On the contrary, the designation “novela negra” has caused a great number of heated discussions among Spanish scholars since 1975, when Francisco Franco died and his dictatorship came to an end. After a democratic government was finally in place, several authors, finally liberated from the oppression and censorship of the dictatorial regime, started publishing crime fiction novels that shared many

elements with the novels of American hard-boiled writers. Based on their similarity and the French antecedent of calling hard-boiled novels “roman noir,” some people started calling this type of fiction “novela negra.” However, others used the term “novela policíaca,” because their protagonist is a police detective. This style of writing is also present in short stories, which are consequently called “cuentos policíacos” (“cuento” means short story). In English, we refer to these as detective novels and short stories, though, by so doing, we imply that the detective is the main character. The problem with this English translation is that we automatically think of private detectives like Sherlock Holmes, not of police detectives. In addition, in the classic detective novels, the private detective is in opposition to or in competition with the police: in this subgenre, the police is viewed as crude, inefficient, and lacking in intelligence and originality, while the private detective is refined, highly educated, and of superior intelligence. Of course, the private detective always solves the crime before the police. In conclusion, the terminology used to refer to these subgenres is very confusing, so it warrants a review and a change.¹

For the sake of clarity, I am including here a table with the current translations of the terms involved, as well as my recommended translations. It is important to emphasize that these translations are unidirectional, meaning they only go from left to right of the page, not the other way around. Here it is:

Original term translation	Current translation(s)	Recommended
Hard-boiled novel	Novela negra	Novela negra

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Novela negra	Noir novel, noir fiction	“Hard-boiled novel” if it refers to the American authors of hard-boiled fiction; “crime fiction” if it refers to European works.
Detective novel	Novela policíaca or novela de enigma or novela problema	Novela de detectives
Novela policíaca	Detective novel	Crime fiction
Police procedural	Novela policial clásica	Novela de procedimientos policíacos
Crime fiction	Novela/cuento de crimen o Criminal or narrativa de crimen	Narrativa de crimen/novela or cuento de crimen

With my recommendations, the terminology used consistently places the protagonist in the title given to the subgenre, so there’s no confusion possible: a detective novel has a private detective as protagonist, thus its name. The corresponding Spanish equivalent should be “novela de detective”, not “novela

policíaca”, as it’s usually translated. The challenging police procedural term should, as an exception, be translated literally: “novela de procedimientos policíacos”. In this way, the focus of the novel becomes clear, and we distinguish these novels from the standard crime novels in which the criminals are co-protagonists with the police (although sometimes the criminals are the protagonists, stealing the lead role from the police, pun intended!).

In conclusion, we have seen the intricate difficulties of translating these mystery and suspense fiction subgenres, and how it was necessary to know the origin and history of the terminology involved, as well as the current status of literary scholarship on this topic, in order to translate these terms appropriately. In doing so, we have realized that translators, in instances like these, have to become specialized researchers in order to do their job successfully. Translators need to start presenting themselves to the public as something much more than people who “just” restate sentences from one language to another in a mechanical manner –as so many people describe us-: we need to treat translation as research, present ourselves as language researchers, and elevate our profession to a higher position than where it presently stands. Once we and other people understand our role as researchers, as we, translators, start adding footnotes and endnotes explaining the reasoning behind our translated words and expressions, our profession will start receiving, hopefully, a higher regard, more attention, and a better financial compensation.

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¹ For good analyses on the Spanish terminology regarding noir fiction, read the fine articles of Salvador Vázquez de Parga and the great book by Patricia Hart.