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Interpreting English Across Cultures: Mediating Meaning in Shōgun Through a Thai Lens

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nuanced role of interpreters in the 2024 FX adaptation of Shōgun, focusing on how they mediate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Using a combined approach of Thematic Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, and drawing on dual perspectives as academics and professional interpreters, we examine how interpreters in the series shape dialogue and influence political, religious, and social interactions. Far from being neutral conduits, the interpreters reframe, omit, and adapt messages to reflect personal, cultural, and strategic considerations. Through a Thai–English interpretive lens of intercultural communication and inductive approaches, the study draws parallels between the series and real-world practices, particularly in high-context societies like Thailand and Japan. It argues that interpreters often act as political agents, religious mediators, and cultural gatekeepers, making decisions that maintain harmony, protect status, and guide intercultural understanding. This fictional portrayal offers valuable insights into the real-life complexities

of language mediation, underscoring the significance of interpreters in shaping intercultural encounters.

Keywords: intercultural mediation, interpreting in fiction, Thai–English interpreting, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), thematic analysis

Introduction

Throughout history, the role of interpreters has evolved beyond the traditional conduit model explained by Reddy (1979) to include more complex functions as intercultural mediators (Pokorn & Mikolič Južnič, 2020). Acknowledging the growing significance of this transition, this study investigates the process of intercultural mediation in the series 'Shōgun' based on Australian-British writer James Clavell's acclaimed novel 'Shōgun' (1975). Set in early 17th-century Japan during a time of political upheaval and religious tension, the series depicts the English navigator John Blackthorne's encounters with Japanese leaders and missionaries, assisted by the help of interpreter Mariko. This shift from passive language transfer to a more active, at times opinionated, form of interpreting is evident in many occupational spheres, where interpreters seek a balanced position between faithfulness and cultural sensitivity.

Through a thematic and interpretative phenomenology analysis of key interpreting scenes in Shōgun, the study investigates how interpreters mediate meaning in high-stakes and multicultural/lingual environments. The interpreters in the series seemingly do more than render words. They withhold, adapt, and reframe messages to align with shifting political loyalties, while preserving intercultural harmony and asserting power. It should be noted that the investigated interpreters are fictional and may have differences from real-world interpreters. As little work has been done on Western literary works interpreted through Thai cultural frames, the paper draws comparative reflections from Thai–English interpreting contexts, where parallel tensions are often experienced and navigated. By approaching through a Thai lens, this study explores what fictional portrayals can reveal about real-world interpreting practices in intercultural Southeast Asian settings. To guide the investigation, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How are interpreters in Shōgun portrayed as mediators of political, religious, and sociocultural meaning?'

2. In what ways do their interpreting choices reflect broader intercultural communication principles found in Thai–English interpreting contexts?

Literature Review

Empirical Research on Shōgun

Despite the existing opinion blogs on the role of Shōgun interpreters (Andrews, 2024; Snyder, 2024), there appears to be a dearth of empirical research on the role of interpreters in the series, arguably due to the recency of the series [For works investigating the role of interpreters in film, see Takeda (2013)]. In their blogs, Andrews (2024) observes that all interpreters in the series are non-professional which may have influenced their decisions to paraphrase conveyed messages while Snyder (2024) observes the dynamics of multiple languages, the role of interpreters, interpreting techniques, and interpretation point of view (i.e., first-person vs. third-person).

Scholarly works on the novel and its adaptation primarily explore comparative themes and perspectival oppositions. A study by Benslama and Souhali (2024) offers comparative insights into the storytelling methods, whilst Marginean (2014) investigates cultural contrasts between Europeans and Japanese characters. Both, however, do not particularly investigate or discuss the interpreter roles, suggesting a scarcity of interpreter-pertinent articles on the adaptation despite interpreters being an integral mechanism of the plot. While interpreter roles remain largely unexplored in analyses of the Shōgun narrative, they have attracted more scholarly attention in Japanese institutional and cross-cultural contexts, particularly in healthcare and legal settings (Anazawa et al., 2012).

Conceptual Orientation: English Language and Intercultural Perspectives

While the paper employs an inductive approach through Thematic Analysis (TA) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researchers' interpretative lens is informed, consciously and unconsciously, by a range of English Language Studies and Intercultural Communication theories. Although they guide how interpreting events are understood and offer valuable insights into how interpreters operate as cultural agents, they are not prescriptive templates and are not deterministically applied across all themes.

First, the conduit metaphor (Reddy, 1979) frames the paper at the interface of language and power, as this study challenges and disrupts the

notion that interpreters are neutral conduits from language A to B. We situate this theory in view of Intercultural Mediation Theory (Liddicoat, 2016), which posits that interpreters negotiate meanings across cultures. It involves a broader scope of agency, exemplified by Lady Mariko in the series.

Second, Politeness Theory or Facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998) is constructed on the notion of face-saving while offering a framework to analyse the series interpreter's omissions and rephrasings. The series provides multiple examples of face-saving strategies.

Third, the framework of Translanguaging and English as a lingua franca (García & Wei, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011). The English language in the series becomes the narrative bridge we hear as audience as opposed to the historical original dialogues in Portuguese. The decision not to fully immerse with the original language reflects the fluidity of the current lingua franca as informed by the decisions of the director, while also being pressured by Hollywood and global media expectations. In this sense, the interpreters, characters, film-makers, and even audiences participate in translingual dynamism.

Fourth, High and Low-Context cultures (Hall, 1976) and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (2001)(e.g., Power Distance, Collectivism) provide a framework for clashing societal contexts as Japan and England. They emphasise how cultural values shape how interpretation is framed, particularly in meetings between members of collectivist societies (Japan, Thailand) and more individualist, low-context counterparts (England).

These frameworks help researchers contextualise the interpreters' decisions, as well as the series director's. While not imposed prescriptively, they may be referenced in the discussion where they respond and resonate with the themes that emerged inductively.

The inclusion of multiple theoretical frameworks in this study warrants explicit justification. Rather than reflecting a scattered theoretical approach, this multi-framework design responds to the inherently multidimensional nature of interpreter mediation in cross-cultural contexts. An interpreter operates simultaneously across political (power negotiation), cultural (norm mediation), linguistic (translanguaging practices), and interpersonal (face management) dimensions. By virtue of this complexity, no single theoretical lens can adequately capture such multifaceted mediation. The frameworks selected form an integrated analytical architecture. This integrated framework addresses a central research gap: while individual theories have been applied to interpreting studies in isolation, no existing research has synthesised them to analyse fictional interpreter portrayals through a non-Western, specifically Thai–English, comparative lens. The multiplicity of frameworks is therefore not arbitrary but methodologically essential, serving as interpretive resources

that illuminate rather than constrain the analysis, a principle consistent with the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach employed in this study.

Film and Adaptations

The film is the second adaptation by FX while the first adaptation was in 1980 as a TV series. The series has received recognition by winning eight awards from the 2025 Golden Globe and the 2025 Critics' Choice Awards, including Best Television Series (Drama), Best Television Male Actor, Best Actress and more. As the show has gained its popularity from the public, we argue that it also deserves a scholarly attention as the interpreters play pivotal roles in changing the course of international political and cultural narratives between Japan and European powers.

Languages, Dialects, and Their Implications

Variations in language require deeper interpretation in the series as the protagonist makes his way to Japan in the year 1600. The story took place in the island nation during the period of Sengoku as the islands were undergoing political upheavals (Clavell, 1975). From an interview with Jimmy Kimmel in 2024, Sawai, the actress, explains that the Japanese language spoken at that time is imperial Japanese, which is based on distinct sets of grammatical and lexical rules from modern Japanese prior to World War I (Frellesvig, 2010).

The protagonist is English John Blackthorne who appears to struggle with the new language of 'the Japans,' the actual term used by Blackthorne, arguably signifying novelty and distant foreignness from his motherland. Though his native tongue is English, he has acquired what may be assumed a proficient level of Portuguese, as portrayed in the interactions with the Jesuit priest, Father Alvito who quickly detects Blackthorne's English-accented Portuguese. Such detection is integral to the political and religious implications that would later unfold between the existing Catholic Portugal (and Spain) and the newly arrived Protestant English. The series illustrates the conversations from English to Japanese although the actual renditions would be between Portuguese and Japanese.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative textual analysis, employing the first season, consisting of 10 episodes, of the 2024 television series 'Shōgun' available on Disney+ as the data. It employed an inductive approach to investigate the interpreters' roles based on the emergent instances in the series

through dialogue and character development where interpreters, either willingly or under compulsion, actively shape the bridging of the cultural gaps (where present). The research applied Thematic Analysis (TA)(Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) with the lens of Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA)(Smith et al., 2012). There were five procedural steps that we followed to ensure data and analytical trustworthiness. Applying a hybrid analytical approach that combines TA with IPA arguably allowed the researchers to identify recurring themes in the interpreters' experiences and their intentions in guiding intercultural mediation while attending to the lived personal experiences that may have contributed to those decisions. The combination of TA and IPA was chosen to balance pattern-oriented analysis with experiential interpretation. While TA identifies recurring mediatory functions across episodes, IPA allows deeper insight into the interpreters' perceived intentions and inner conflicts as represented in the series. This hybrid approach provides both structural and phenomenological perspectives on interpreter agency and mediation.

The first step was to observe the series closely, mainly paying attention to how interpreters were portrayed while documenting specific scenes, speeches, phrases, and/or cultural decisions (i.e., introduction of Japanese practices or etiquette). These encompassed stages of mediation that extend beyond straightforward A–B renditions. The second step involved preliminary pattern and theme identification where we critically developed a draft of mediation types and purposes (i.e., to incite political stance, to influence alliances, or to resolve conflict). The third step was to formulate secondary themes as overarching or major themes that represent the mediation functions and entail minor themes. Drawing from Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the penultimate step was to develop an understanding of how interpreters' subjective lived experiences in the 'Japans' inform their mediatory decisions, linking these to existing theoretical frameworks through the lens of Thai interpreting scholarship (e.g., parallel encounters in Thai–English interpreting in view of political, cultural, and personal intertwinements). The last step involved extrapolating the role of interpreters as intercultural mediators in politically shifting Japan, which may be theoretically and practically relevant to interpreting scholars and interpreters. The analysis included verbal exchanges as well as non-verbal and para-verbal elements such as gestures, tone, and silence, which were essential in understanding the interpreters' communicative and cultural mediation strategies.

Researchers' Positionality

This study draws on the lens of Thai–English interpreting practices. Both researchers are situated within Thailand's academic and professional interpreting contexts, with first-hand experience in language mediation. We acknowledge that we occupy a dual insider-outsider perspective: one that is highly attuned to the localised nuances of Thai interpreting norms while critically analysing fictional and interpretational representations in the series.

Our analysis of the series is therefore academic and phenomenological. As full-time academics in Thailand, we are inevitably shaped by the collectivist value systems, religious, and hierarchical narratives. In applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we co-construct meaning (Smith et al., 2012) between researchers and the text. While we are analysts of the series, we also approach it as interpreters of our behaviours. We bring to the discussion our academic (what should interpreters do?), professional (what would I do in this situation?), and cultural (how would I feel within the context?) experience.

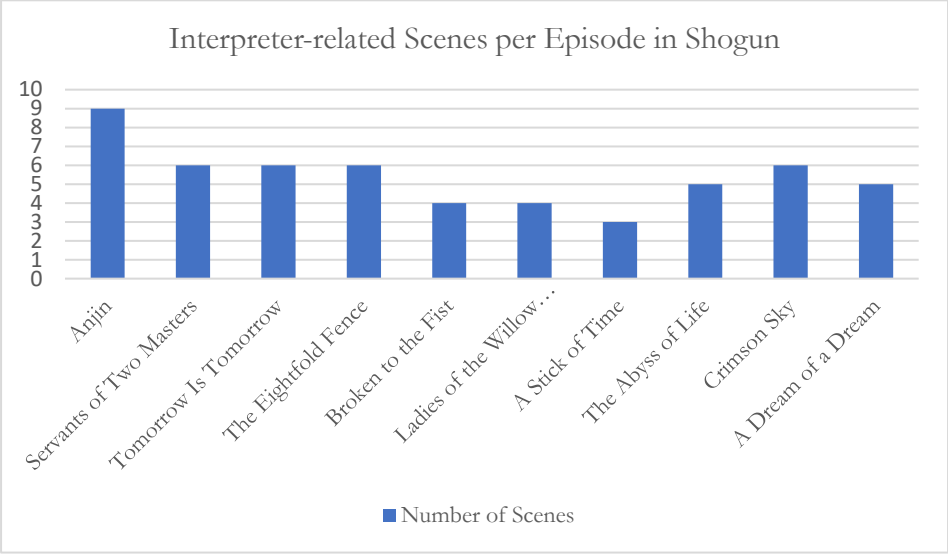
To enhance trustworthiness and minimise over-subjectivity, both researchers engaged in iterative cross-checking and interpretive dialogue throughout the analysis, ensuring that emerging interpretations were mutually verified and grounded in textual evidence rather than individual intuition.

Results

This section, employing TA, presents the key themes and emergent insights derived from the second to the fourth stages: initial pattern identification, major theme formulation, and theoretical linkage. Drawing from Thematic Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the results reveal that interpreters in the series are not restricted to the role of conventional conduit, but rather they act as complex agents, navigating cultural, political, and personal tensions. The scenes were grouped together and treated as the same scene in instances where they were close to one another, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. In this paper, a scene is defined as a distinct segment of the series, typically marked by an interpreter's presence, that highlights moments of linguistic and cultural mediation. There is no fixed criterion on duration, but a scene normally ranges from seconds to approximately five minutes in length.

Figure 1

Interpreter-related Scenes per Episode in Shogun



Amongst the episodes analysed, Episode 1 contains the most interpreter-relevant scenes, which may signify the establishment of linguistic, cultural, and power boundaries at the outset of the story. In contrast, Episode 7 features fewer such interactions since there appears to be less linguistic reliance and dependence on local interpreters. By this point, Blackthorne has developed his proficiency in Japanese, given the considerable time spent on the island. In terms of relationship, the character has also somewhat shifted to a partial insider of the Japanese circle. The purpose of the second stage is to observe the recurring themes in the ten episodes. Using thematic analysis, these were based on the types of mediation committed by the interpreters. Overall, nine preliminary themes were identified as a foundation for later analytical stages although some may still share ideological overlaps.

1. Political Alignment Mediation: to ensure reinforcement of power structures, to form allegiance, and/or manipulate political ideas; e.g., 'I will translate without prejudice,' says Father Elvito (Episode 2), which contradicts the heavily involved political affiliation as a Catholic interpreter.

2. Power & Status Mediation: to use selective interpretation to control knowledge access; e.g., 'You will soon be executed,' says the priest interpreter to Blackthorne (Episode 1). It is a message to suppress power to incite dominance.

3. Faith-Based Mediation: to foster religious ideologies in multi-faith settings; 'Do you swear by your god?' says Mariko (Episode 2). The statement demonstrates the clash of religious powers between Catholicism and Protestantism.

4. Face-Saving or Politeness Mediation: to do away with potentially offensive messages, to omit rude words or phrases; e.g., Mariko's omission of rude messages: 'Is the animal behaving himself?' (Episode 3) in order to safeguard against offensive language.

5. Emotion Management: to guard against the well-being of the listener; e.g., the interpreter makes a comment and does not interpret it: 'He is a shit face but a brave one,' (Episode 8). This is arguably done so to steer clear of escalating tension.

6. Consent and Agency Mediation: to override someone's voice by not interpreting for nor representing them; e.g., Blackthorne voices: 'I will not be spoken for by a Catholic' (Episode 1) to protest against possibly unfair interpretation influenced by oppositional religions.

7. Strategic Withholding: to amend meaning for safety, diplomacy, or personal motives; e.g., Mariko's constant decisions to render, leave out, or shorten/ filter out the message: 'With utmost respect, the Anjin apologises for the misunderstanding,' leaving out Blackthorne's hostile remarks toward Omi (Episode 4).

8. Cultural Survival and Educational Mediation: to prevent cultural offenses and to elucidate necessary cultural practices or expressions that may not necessarily be interpretation; e.g., Blackthorne is suggested to do a proper bow: 'Anjin-sama, do not forget to bow' (Episode 7). The interpreter is giving guided cultural advice and correction.

9. Subversive Mediation: to intentionally reposition the message to serve a hidden agenda(s); e.g., 'excuse me. I am reminded an interpreter should interpret only,' while delicately giving suggestions on power dynamics (Episode 6).

The third analytical stage was to formulate secondary themes which the researchers combined any overlapped Stage-2 themes into more meaningful overarching major themes and specific minor themes. This process involved identifying overlapping intentions, functions, and sociocultural underpinnings that connected otherwise distinct mediatory acts. By critically examining the function and impact of each type of mediation, we arrived at three overarching themes, which reflect the core dimensions of interpreter agency in Shōgun. While additional themes may exist, this paper focuses on three core areas, political, religious, and social & cultural, due to

the scope and analytical focus. Other aspects of interpreter agency remain valuable for future research.

The three overarching themes, focusing on primarily on politics, religion, and culture, suggest the functions and purposed of the interpreters as cultural mediators. The major themes and sub-themes are interpreters as a 1) political agents: a) political alignment mediation, b) power & status mediation; 2) religious mediators; 3) social & cultural gatekeepers. The following section elaborates each nuanced theme in detail.

Interpreters as Political Agents

In the role of interpreters as political agents, interpreters utilise mediation as part of their practice in order to serve two political objectives (defined as sub-themes): political alignment mediation and power & status mediation.

Political Alignment Mediation

Political alignment refers to the act of influencing specific alliances, allegiance, or manipulating powers. Interpreters normally align themselves with dominant powers.

In Episode 1, the Catholic priest interpreter tells Blackthorne, 'You will soon be executed, as will your men' to signify and intimidate Blackthorne who is of different religious beliefs. The inflammatory language is fueled with religious dispute of Catholic dominance over a Protestant newcomer. One might even question whether the priest functions as an interpreter at all. On the other hand, Blackthorne protests, 'I am not one of them! And I will not be spoken for by Catholics' as he stomps his foot firmly. The statement highlights the denial of the politically-swayed priest (interpreter), which could result in selective and biased rendition. Throughout the series, juxtaposing ideas emerge from both sides although Father Alvito, who appears to be deeply invested in Catholic political interests promises Blackthorne, that he would 'translate without prejudice' (Episode 2).

Moreover, it is observed that interpreters use language to manipulate or protect political allies. In Episode 4, Mariko replaces Blackthorne's condescending remarks about his rival, 'tell this milk-dribbling, fuck swear I am ready to go' to an entirely masked polite statement, 'With utmost respect, the Anjin (pilot) apologises for the misunderstanding' is ambiguously rendered to downplay negative comments which could lead to a casualty. Ultimately, in Episode 7, interpreter Mariko is questioned where her heart lies, considering her close physical proximity with Blackthorne. Although it is

seemingly a personal question, it also directs towards her occupational and political affiliation.

Power & Status Mediation

Under this sub-theme, interpreters carefully manage hierarchies by selectively interpreting for controlling knowledge and limiting knowledge access. Being able to control what is conveyed to whom, interpreters can preserve status and arrange powers. These are some of the distinct scenes. Episode 1– A Catholic Japanese interpreter responds on behalf of soldiers without translating, maintaining hierarchical control. With apparently limited English knowledge (his actual skills are unveiled in a later episode), the interpreter asserts control over the conversation by filtering which piece of information is conveyed. His selective mediation reinforces the authority of the Portuguese clergy with the Japanese, exemplifying how interpreters may reshape communication.

In Episode 3, Mariko completely omits the phrase, 'Is the animal behaving himself?' to prevent humility for both parties. Likewise, Blackthorne is referred to as a barbarian but this was not interpreted. Thereby, Mariko acts as an editor, selectively omitting Blackthorne's narrative to protect his face and avoid public humiliation. Comparably, in Episode 4, Mariko also evaluates and do away with Blackthorne's sensitive remarks, 'tell him to go to hell.' She does so by explaining the situation on nearly all behalf of both sides. In another scene, Mariko's omission of Blackthorne's true occupation (status) as a pilot. This decision underscores her role in managing his social credibility and aligns with interpreters in collectivist cultures, where maintaining harmony and saving face may overtake factual delivery.

In other instances, the interpreter assumes the role of a full moderator. In Episode 5, the interpreter mediates a tense sake-drinking exchange involving Mariko's husband, who has recently returned (from presumed death). Though others express dislike of the dish, she declines the rabbit stew on behalf of the Japanese side, stating that it is 'our loss,' with little to no direct interpretation offered. Potentially inflammatory comments are tactfully rephrased to mitigate threats and preserve dignity; for example, 'Look at how he eats, like a baby monkey.' This moderating role is further exemplified in Episode 8, where the interpreter deliberately omits the vulgar remark 'He is a shit face but a brave one,' in order to de-escalate tension and maintain decorum.

Interpreters as Religious Mediators

The data suggests that interpreters in the series engage in faith-based mediation to bridge discrepancies between conflicting religious worldviews. They may choose to mitigate potential offence or violation of beliefs by omitting blasphemous or heretical content since religious ideologies may be pushed through interpreted words. Divergent religious beliefs, i.e., Catholicism, Protestantism, Shintoism, and Buddhism, intersect with political ideologies which compel interpreters to prioritise peace over offering equivalences. Several scenes highlight such complex mediatory role. In Episode 2, Mariko uses faith-based language to assess honesty: 'Do you swear by your god?' Given that Mariko is a Catholic, this sentence delves into the religious divide of the deeply-rooted tension between Catholicism and Protestantism, while at the same time, they come in the form of intended misinterpretation or omission. In the same episode, a Japanese lady blatantly mocks a Catholic priest who is fluent in Japanese by stating, 'or maybe God's kingdom is up your ass.' This demonstrates a strong religious tension which would have been an issue, a decision to be made, had there been an interpreter's presence.

In Episode 1, a priest interprets Blackthorne's fate through the lens of divine justice, claiming, 'You will soon be executed.' This priest is not Father Alvito but another Portuguese interpreter, and by taking the harness, the sentence is rather a show of power than a legal interpretation. This may have caused distrust in the interpreter. The example from Episode 2 is more explicit when Blackthorne questions Father Alvito's role as interpreter and his neutrality as their religious rivalry may underpin interpretation fairness.

On the other hand, when questioned about his faith loyalty, in Episode 9, 'Kiyama,' member of the Council of Regents, whose faith belongs to Catholicism subtly expresses the declining conquer of Catholic rule by saying that he is now a 'student of trade.' The suggested shift in power play signifies the political transition in allegiance choosing, distancing himself from rigid religious identity to a more secular worldview.

As opposed to this political distancing from faith, the beginning of the episode illustrates a personal and spiritual moment, where a cross-faith, arguably conflicting or harmonious, practice unfolds as Mariko begins the Lord's Prayer in Latin, joined by Blackthorne's prayers in English (likely his mother tongue, or possibly Portuguese depending on the language interpretation). The contrasting languages in overlapped prayers highlight a juxtaposition of religious co-existence. Whether this represents conflict or harmony is open to interpretation.

Interpreters as Social and Cultural Gatekeepers

Departing from the conduit role whereby interpreters faithfully deliver message renditions from language A to B (Reddy, 1979), interpreters may find themselves in predicaments where it may be necessary to facilitate worldviews through explanations of norms, etiquette, and/or social rituals, such as performing the Japanese bow and understanding the purpose of the self-inflicted ritual of Seppuku. Since interpreters are seemingly the voice and the face of the speakers, any violation of social rules may be claimed on the interpreters. The most prominent examples are omission and rephrasing. In several instances, Mariko intervenes to explain Japanese etiquette to Blackthorne. By doing so, she underscores the interpreter's responsibility to prevent cultural misunderstandings. For example, in Episode 2, Mariko clearly articulates the function of bowing as a gesture of respect. In Episode 3, she corrects Blackthorne's grip on chopsticks, demonstrating that physical movement may fall under the interpreter's sphere of intercultural communication influence.

As the series progresses, Blackthorne attains the hatamoto status, a hierarchical climb that comes with responsibilities. The role of Mariko has arguably been instrumental in not only bridging linguistic, but also fostering cultural understanding, Blackthorne into a more integrated member of the new society.

In Episode 5, Mariko explains local customs/expectations during a formal drinking event from loudly slurping noodles to show deliciousness and enjoyment to using smaller cubs for frequent interaction, while refusing to interpret Blackthorne's condescending comment that only women would drink off these cups. In Episode 7, Mariko's cultural influence is visibly reflected in Blackthorne's behaviours, as he is reminded to properly bow and wear his sword. This degree of developing cultural integration shaped largely by Mariko's guidance. Her role is limited to language, but extends into influencing social and cultural alignment, while also safeguarding relationships.

Table 1 below summarises the role of interpreters as political agents**,** religious mediators, and social-cultural gatekeepers, shaping who may speak, what may be said, and on what terms. Across scenes, concise moves, omission/softening, contextual additions, opinion-as-translation, and turn-taking control regulate which propositions are rendered, by whom, and under what constraints. Interpreter mediation thus functions as an interaction design that stabilises high-stakes encounters rather than merely transferring word.

Table 1

Sample of Interpreter Mediation Moves and Interactional Functions Across Selected Scenes

Episode / scene numbers	Short scene descriptions	Interpreters' move	Immediate effect
Ep1 – beach/ parley with Yabushige	Priest: 'Very bad man. Make Murder Japan and Portuguese.'	Opinion-as-translation; addition	Frames Blackthorne as hostile; justifies confiscation; constrains his agency
Ep1 – beach/ parley with Yabushige	Priest: 'Yabushige-sama says your heretic ship now belongs to him.'	Loaded lexical choice; addition	Escalates religious hostility; strengthens Yabushige's position
Ep1 – Blackthorne protest	Blackthorne: 'I will not be spoken for by Catholics.'	Consent/agency assertion by primary speaker	Challenges interpreter's neutrality; requests impartial mediation
Ep2 – world map/ treaty claim	Mariko: 'Do you swear by your god?'	Truth-testing via oath; cultural anchoring	Creates shared moral warrant for credibility across belief divide
Ep2 – world map/ treaty claim	Mariko: 'This is a lie.' / Blackthorne: 'No.'	Direct challenge; stance marking	Forces explicit commitment under oath; clarifies positions
Ep3 – animal remark omitted	Omitted: 'Is the animal behaving himself?'	Omission; softening	Prevents offense; maintains harmony
Ep4 – Omi confrontation softened	Rendered: 'With utmost respect, the Anjin apologises …'	Strategic withholding; rephrasing	Defuses conflict; preserves negotiation channel
Ep4 – hatamoto status explained	Mariko: 'It is only fitting for a hatamoto.'	Cultural explanation / education	Aligns Blackthorne with new rank, duties, and benefits
Ep5 – dinner etiquette & remarks	Reframing of derogatory dining remark (described)	Filtering + respectful rephrase	Keeps ritual conviviality; avoids flare-up

Episode / scene numbers	Short scene descriptions	Interpreters' move	Immediate effect
Ep7 – bowing guidance	Mariko: 'Anjin-sama, do not forget to bow.'	Cultural guidance / correction	Prevents social sanction; ensures smooth interaction

Discussion and Conclusion

This section bridges the emergent themes, based on the interpreters' roles influenced by their lived experiences and their positioning through the lens of thematic analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological approach, with a view towards Thai-English interpreting complications. Due to copyright issues, excerpted dialogues will be presented instead of screenshots.

Interpreters as Political Agents: 'I will not be spoken for by Catholics'

This theme synthesises the themes of political alignment mediation and power & status mediation. Interpretation may be rendered to align or (re)align political course, especially the case where interpreters are within power structures (Inghilleri, 2005), as attested in the following scenes.

In one of the earliest opening scenes from Episode 1, Blackthorne has just been captured and is being interpreted for. This conversation involves Lord Yabushige (feudal lord), Blackthorne, Omi (Yabushige's nephew), and the priest interpreter:

> Priest: Lord Yabushige, honored I that you come village.
> Lord Yabushige: [*to Omi*] He's the best priest you have? [*signs*] [*to priest*] Priest, you will translate for me and this barbarian. Who is he? And why is he here?
> [*In English*] Our busho, Lord of Izu, Kashigi Yabushige, he asks to know who you are and how you came to this land.
> Blackthorne: Who are you?
> Priest: A servant of God.
> Blackthorne: Your God. First make that distinction, you papist prick.
> Lord Yabushige: [in Japanese] Priest. Why is he angry with you?
> Priest: Him evil. Make death. Pirate.
> Blackthorne: My name is John Blackthorne. I'm English. Pilot of the Erasmus. A Dutch merchant vessel. We were blown off course two months ago.
> Priest: Lies! That is a Dutch privateer and you're a pirate come to war on a peaceful Portuguese settlement.
> Omi: [*in Japanese*] Priest! Translate.
> Priest: Very bad man. Make Murder Japan and Portuguese.

> Blackthorne: They don't know about us, do they? You've told them Portugal's the only flag in Europe. Which means I am the first English sailor to reach your Catholic treasury. And you have no intention of translating my words. [*To Y*abushige] I beg your king for parley. I humbly ask for safe passage.
> Lord Yabushige: [*In Japanese*] Tell him his ship is confiscated.
> Priest: [*In English*] Yabushige-sama says your heretic ship now belongs to him.

Firstly, it appears that the language proficiency of the interpreter is insufficient with subtitled sentences such as 'Him evil' or 'Make murder Japan and Portuguese.' Secondly, the priest's statement to Blackthorne, 'you will soon be executed, as will your men' is not a translation, but his opinion. Blackthorne likely felt confined because of his linguistic inabilities. It phenomenologically challenges his existence, voice (or voicelessness), and agency or lack thereof. As he questioned if the Japanese knew about his motherland, Blackthorne could have heavily felt a sense of loss and helplessness. In the chaos, requesting a qualified and fair interpreter may not register as a plausible request that can be asked. This lived experience suggests possible internal feelings of conflicted political loyalty, a juxtaposition (or a merger as in the case of the said interpreter) of professional role and personal stance. With minimal linguistic qualifications combined with strong political motive, the interpreter acts more as an active political agent. Not as someone who facilitates mutual understanding, but someone who shapes what can or should be asserted, by exercising his power although through very limited language. This instance challenges the conduit role (Reddy, 1979), where interpreters assumed neutral roles. The interpreter aligns himself with power which also reflects Hofstede's (2001) high power distance, where inequalities are expected, influencing how communication is delivered to uphold hierarchy. In return, Blackthorne asserts himself:

> 'I am not one of them! And I will not be spoken for by Catholics. Not in Europe and certainly not in this dark place' subsequent to a series of distorted messages of
> 'Lord! Danger! Pirate must die!'

This suggests Blackthorne's pending right to have an impartial interpreter (Bancroft, 2005) who would not change the political course nor treat the session as the power game between Protestant and Catholicism. Caught in this dynamic, Blackthorne challenges the status quo, 'Oh, good. So, you'll be able to twist my words in your Portuguese favor.'

On 15 June 2025, a private phone call between Thailand's former Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Cambodia's Hun Sen was leaked to the public (Thepgumpanat & Lach, 2025). The call had been interpreted

by Cambodian interpreter Khleang Huot, prompting concerns about whether the interpretation may have been shaped to serve one-sided ideological interests. Similar to the Portuguese interpreter in Shōgun, Huot emerges as more than a linguistic conduit. He becomes, or may already have become, a key political actor. His interpretive decisions hold the power to influence public perception and trigger either positive or negative political developments.

In another scene where Blackthorne is invited to give warfare lessons to the Japanese, Lady Mariko, to support him, omits that Blackthorne is a mere pilot and gives suggestions as to what stories to share, considering that others begin to question his credibility. This extension beyond linguistic transfer illustrates a mediatory role to preserve Blackthorne's credibility and face in a high-stakes, hierarchical context. Similarly, Thai interpreters may undergo similar experiences when interpreting for royal, governmental, or diplomatic purposes. Operating in a collectivist culture such as Thailand and Japan (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2001), interpreters may prioritise relationships over bluntness. It is a complex role where interpreters may be expected to save 'face' (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998) as Mariko transitions from language interpreting to co-writing the event course. Taking a technical act, Mariko becomes a co-narrator, who is able to influence dialogue co-construction (Wadensjö, 2014), while strategically prioritising Blackthorne's credibility.

Interpreters as Religious Mediators: Amen, Sadhu?

Interpreters constantly offer faith-based mediation to mitigate offence or inspire confidence. The following scene predominantly involves Lord Toranaga (a powerful daimyo, feudal lord, and member of the Council of Regents), Blackthorne, and Mariko in a conversation about the world map.

> Blackthorne: [*drawing a map*] This is the way Portugal and Spain carved up the New World. Seventy years ago, they signed a treaty that split undiscovered land between them. Your country falls into the Portuguese half. So it belongs to them.
> Mariko: [*In Japanese*] He believes Portugal and Spain have divided up this region. He claims that Japan…belongs to the Portuguese.
> Lord Toranaga: Did he really say 'belongs'?
> Mariko: Yes, Lord. …
> Blackthorne: I'm sorry, sir, but I assure you their arrogance is unbelievable. Please tell him. It's written into legal documents. Each Spanish and Portuguese king has the right to lay claim to any non-Catholic land they discover, and to replace its government with Catholic rule.

Mariko: This is a lie.
Blackthorne: No.
Mariko: Do you swear by your god?
Blackthorne: Yes, I do.

Mariko's question, 'Do you swear by your god?' (Episode 2), following Blackthorne's revelation that the world has been divided by political powers of Portugal and Spain, illustrates the use of 'god' as a testament of faithfulness, a tool to gauge honesty in relation to interpretation. While she refused to believe at first, in this instance, Lady Mariko utilises faith as a measurement of honesty and integrity. With that confirmation, Blackthorne was allowed to state his purpose, i.e., to vanguish their common foes. Mariko takes the role of an assessor of morality based religious beliefs. Doing so invokes a culturally situated form of facework (Ting-toomey & Kurogi, 1998), where 'god' functions as a measure of morality and trustworthiness across religious divides amongst different deities. In the Thai context, interpreters may be able to rely on Buddhist concepts of karma or merit making to reframe truth and spiritual integrity. For instance, modern-day Thailand requires its government officers prior to assuming their duties to take an oath of allegiance to the King. As the monarch, traditionally revered as divine, may represent sacredness and moral authority for the people to uphold, based on Devaraja or 'god-king' (Jackson, 2009), arguably paralleling Mariko's 'god' invocation. Thai interpreters can also leverage the concept as a culturally comparable measurement of truth.

Another scene features Lady Mariko praying in Latin while Blackthorne joins in using English (or Portuguese), offering a compelling illustration of religious and linguistic co-existence/ juxtaposition. The use of overlapping languages for prayer highlights a moment of cross-lingual, cultural, and faith exchange, demonstrating the principle of translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014) and emphasising Seidlhofer's (2011) notion of English as a lingua franca and a functional tool, in place of Portuguese, in current global settings. In a comparable context in Thailand, Buddhist prayers and chants are typically recited in Pali, a liturgical language closely related to Sanskrit (Chayasitt, 2017). The continued use of this ancient language, although barely understood by laypeople, holds a prominent place in Theravada Buddhism, the main denomination in Thailand, as Pali is considered more sacred than Thai (Swearer, 2012). This mirrors how Latin is used in Christian liturgy and rituals. Thai religious interpreters, tasked to interpret doctrinal texts or speeches, may be positioned to transfer faith through understandable laymen's terms and precepts even with Thai speakers. In more intercultural spaces where English-speaking people join interfaith dialogue, there may be more layering of Thai, Pali, and English

which would require interpreters to navigate with linguistic and spiritual sensitivity.

Interpreters as Social and Cultural Gatekeepers: Kneel and Bow?

Under this theme, cultural facilitation, i.e., explanation of local norms, etiquette, and behaviours becomes the interpreters' responsibility beyond direct interpretation. Particularly in high-context cultures like Japan and Thailand (Hall, 1976) where communication is implicitly done, interpreters may have to mediate not only language, but also implicit cultural rituals and expectations. Facilitation and education of cultural norms may be necessary for the interlocutors to fully grasp the communication essence. The process encompasses an interpreter intervening to provide an explanation as portrayed in the following example of a hatamoto bestowment. The promotion is not accidental; Mariko's nuanced interpreting and ability to correctly align Blackthorne with Japanese expectations have helped position him as a trustworthy figure. Without her interpretation and mediation, his trajectory would have been marked different.

> Blackthorne: My house?
> Mariko: Everything here has been prepared specially by your staff.
> Blackthorne: My staff?... Why have I been given all of this?
> Mariko: It is only fitting for a hatamoto. …
> Blackthorne: As hatamoto, you have been given a home, a generous salary of 240 koku a year. … And Fuji-sama as a consort.

In Episode 4, Blackthorne's perplexed by all the amenities and the concept of 'consorting' as his growing recognition earns him the title of hatamoto. The hatamoto title is a high honor which solidifies Blackthorne's status from an outsider to an insider in the feudal system of Japan. Mariko's role extends into cultural education (Liddicoat, 2016); she explains that this newly elevated social status comes with "consorting," a term not limited to intimacy but structurally tied to status and allegiance. While the practice no longer exists in Japan, a modern-day Thai parallel might be the conferring of a royal honorary title such as Khunying, which signals elitism and privileges (e.g., preferential treatment). This title is conferred upon married women to recognise their service to the country (Jones, 1971). Mariko effectively explained what the title entails although a modern-day client from a republic without such system would probably require a further cultural fulfillment.

Cultural elucidation recurs throughout the series. In Japanese culture, giving a proper bow is highly expected, regardless of the doer's nationality,

which in this case it is Blackthorne. 'Bow to the bastard-sama if you wanna live,' said Spaniard interpreter Rodrigues to Blackthorne. A subtler cultural etiquette violation may involve a local refusing to perform the Wai when meeting a senior or a person of authority in Thailand, i.e., essentially a refusal to offer respect or acknowledge social hierarchy. The Wai can serve a wide range of functions: utilitarian, hierarchical, nationalistic, self-enhancement, or religious (Powell et al., 2014). On other occasions, Mariko corrects Blackthorne's chopstick grip before he joins an important meeting, reminds him to remove his shoes before entering a nobleman's home, and instructs him on the proper way to address a shogun. Such corrections and reminders align with Intercultural Mediation Theory (Liddicoat, 2016) and politeness strategies (Brown & Levison, 1987) in order to prevent intercultural missteps. In Thailand, a proper chopstick grip may not be taken as seriously as in Japan (Cooper & Cooper, 2005) whereas other areas of social etiquette beyond the dining table are more subtly expected, e.g., refrainment of using feet to point is considered highly disrespectful even for foreigners. While some practices may be overlooked, others, like this one, invite strong social disapproval.

The importance of bowing properly, wearing a sword appropriately, removing shoes before entering a building, and correctly addressing the Shogun is repeatedly emphasised to Blackthorne. These practices may only faintly resemble English social norms, but Blackthorne learns that fluency in such customs helps him align with Japanese expectations. This illustrates that cultural fluency is arguably an integral part of the interpreter's role, as these examples highlight the interpreter's function in ensuring both linguistic and cultural clarity for smooth and successful interactions.

These findings parallel Thai–English interpreting practices, where interpreters balance fidelity and deference within high-context hierarchies. Reflecting Thai cultural values of indirectness, hierarchy, and kreng jai (considerate restraint), interpreters are trained to preserve harmony and face. Mediation in Shōgun thus mirrors the Thai interpreter's role as a cultural navigator rather than a mere language conduit.

Implication of the Study

The interpreters portrayed in Shōgun are fictional characters operating in a pre-modern, 17th-century feudal context without professional standards or accountability structures. Naturally, this historical distance creates substantial differences from contemporary practice. Today's interpreters operate under enhanced linguistic scrutiny as multilingual proficiency spreads, professional codes emphasising fidelity and transparency, recording technologies that document interpreted events, and

legal and certification requirements demanding ethical accountability. Given these, the fictional portrayals should not be considered prescriptive for contemporary professional practice. Rather, the value of this study lies in demonstrating foundational dynamics of interpreter agency that remain theoretically relevant even within professionally constrained contexts.

This theoretical relevance becomes particularly evident when examining contexts that share similar cultural frameworks. Thai-English interpreting contexts share with feudal Japan the cultural foundations of hierarchical respect, collectivism, and face-preservation. Consequently, Thai interpreters may encounter the same fundamental tensions dramatised in Shōgun: negotiating between linguistic fidelity and cultural appropriateness, balancing transparency with pragmatic mediation, and managing face and hierarchy in high-context communication. While contemporary Thai interpreters must operate within professional boundaries, these cultural pressures likely persist. The Shōgun case makes these cultural pressures visible and explicit, offering a pedagogical tool for Thai interpreter training and a theoretical framework for future empirical research on how such pressures are navigated within professional practice.

Limitations of the Study

First, the study acknowledges that the interpreters that are examined are fictional characters, and their decisions and actions may not reflect from those of real-world professionals. Nevertheless, given that real-world interpreting events are often protected by non-disclosure agreements, these fictional portrayals still offer alternative valuable insights. Second, in terms of themes, although the paper focuses on three main themes: political, religious, social/cultural, the actual thematic scope is more comprehensive and promising, warranting further investigation. Third, the languages spoken in the series appear to be Japanese and English. As the researchers are not proficient in Japanese or Portuguese, the analysis is limited to what can be accessed through English subtitles. However, what we are able to provide is insights as Thai professionals, which can bring unique perspectives. Finally, the findings may not be generalisable for all interpreting context and language pairs, but the study gives a comparative lens that can inform context-specific future research. Future research could expand beyond this single fictional source to include comparative analyses of other filmic or literary representations of interpreters, or empirical investigations into Thai audiences' reception of such portrayals. Longitudinal or cross-cultural studies

could also help contextualise how interpreter visibility evolves across time and media.

Final Thoughts

The role of interpreters, as illustrated in Shōgun through Lady Mariko, reveals that interpreters are far more than mere conduits of language but gatekeepers of political, religious, and cultural meaning. Through omission, rephrasing, and carefully mediated additions, Mariko demonstrates how interpreters can help bridge vastly different worlds while negotiating face and mutual understanding. Her warning to Blackthorne, 'Do not be fooled by our politeness, our bows, our maze of rituals. Beneath it all, we could be a great distance away,' reminds us that outward politeness and ritual can conceal deeper cultural distance. In high-context societies like Japan, harmony on the surface often masks complexity beneath.

In contemporary contexts, everyday examples such as videos or anecdotes depicting Japanese commuters remaining quiet despite being disturbed by public nuisances often illustrate similar contrasts. To outsiders, this may appear strange or passive. However, within that cultural context, keeping silent may be considered the right and expected way to behave. In such situations, an interpreter who is both culturally aware and linguistically skilled becomes essential. Their role is not only to interpret but to guide newcomers through unspoken norms and culturally appropriate responses.

This type of cultural mediation is also essential in Thailand, where indirectness, social hierarchy, and deference play significant roles in communication. Thai–English interpreters, like Mariko, are often expected to do more than render speech from one language into another. They are responsible for maintaining social harmony, preserving face, and navigating layers of implicit expectations. Making the right choice such as adjusting tone, managing politeness, or withholding culturally, socially, or politically provoking kind of statements can determine the success of an interaction. From an English Language Studies perspective, this study offers pedagogical implications for translator and interpreter training in Thailand. Education should move beyond language accuracy to foster intercultural communicative competence, ethical reflection, and contextual awareness. Using fictional and real cases like Shōgun in classrooms can help learners see how language shapes power, identity, and cultural understanding, preparing them to act as responsible mediators in diverse intercultural encounters. No matter how worldly or well-travelled we are, when we encounter a new culture, we may still be 'fooled' by unfamiliar linguistic and cultural practices that are not immediately visible. In these moments, interpreters serve as cultural guides who make meaningful connections possible.

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