A Study of the Linguistic Landscape on Phuket Island: Identity, Tourism and Policy

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Article information	Abstract
	This study approaches multilingualism on Phuket Island by means of a linguistic landscape (LL) analysis. The data in this study consists of 185 photographs of shop signs taken from popular streets on the island. They were analyzed via a mixed-methods approach. It was found that different languages were purposely chosen to indicate or showcase the ethnic identities of the shop owners, to reach certain target customers, and to conform to tax regulations. Furthermore, the current study has also identified language changes in Phuket. Hokkien Chinese was found increasingly being replaced by Mandarin Chinese in the shop signs on Phuket Island, while English has become the predominant language as a result of globalization. Strategies in expressing the shop owners' identities and boosting business include the use of local and foreign languages, cultural images, and gender-related terms. Thus, results show that whilst the island has become an international tourist destination following the global trends of language use, the residents still make an effort to preserve their local ethnic identities as portrayed in the linguistic landscape, for both indexical and tourism purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Located on the Andaman coast, Phuket is the biggest island in Thailand. The island also hosts multilingual community that has grown over centuries from agricultural and fishing villages to a regional economic center before becoming a world-class tourist destination nowadays. Currently, the island is one of the most popular tourist destinations, not just in the country but also worldwide. The Office of Provincial Commercial Affairs Phuket reported that in 2023 the number of tourists visiting Phuket exceeded 11 million, with almost 75% being foreign. The total tourism revenue was approximately 372 billion Baht (approximately 11 billion US dollars) according to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2023).

As a result, visitors from all over the world have influenced changes in Phuket over the years, and these changes are manifested in the sociolinguistic profile of the island as can be seen by the diversity of languages displayed in public areas. This multilingual phenomenon thus makes Phuket a prime location for sociolinguistic research. In the current research, the study aims to analyze different perspectives within the Phuket community via the languages used in public spaces. In other words, the study will work to uncover Phuket's linguistic landscape (LL) and

the languages used in visible manifestations in society. This would enable us to truly understand the linguistic aspects of this multilingual community as several past studies have done so in other cities. Previous studies have revealed that the selection of languages in particular areas was not random but rather purposeful. Reasons behind these selections varied: in Ireland's urban areas, English and Irish were used to boost economic activities (Kallen, 2009); in Israel's cities, both Hebrew and Arabic were used to express identities (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006); in Japan, English was commonly found on signs in Tokyo to comply with the country's language policy (Backhaus, 2006); and finally in Thailand, English was a critical language in modernizing Bangkok (Huebner, 2006). Essentially, LL analysis opens a window for linguists to study unique languages in the public spaces of different societies and Phuket is no exception.

Indeed, a study on the LL in Phuket has been conducted before by Choeirod and Chanthao (2023). However, their study only focused on a single beach front street, so the results do not fully portray the linguistic diversity Phuket has to offer. Thus, the current study aims to expand on their work by investigating the LL in more areas, namely: Thalang Road in Phuket Town and Bangla Road in Patong Beach. These sites were chosen due to their popularity and unique tourism experiences. Results of the study are expected to help explain the choices behind the languages on signs in these areas.

Linguistic ecology on the island

According to Mackay (2012), the population of Phuket originally consisted of diverse ethnic groups until the formation of the Kingdom of Siam in the 1930s, which led to the creation of a more homogeneous Thai nation. However, prior to that in the 19th century, Chinese migrants from southeastern China began settling in the area to work in the rapidly expanding tin-mining industry. These settlers introduced the Hokkien dialect and culture, which quickly became integral to Phuket's economy. As noted by Tepsing and Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn (2014), descendants of the Hokkien Chinese were assimilated into the local population. Through trade connections with Penang and Malacca, they developed a unique Sino-Portuguese culture. During this era, the Hokkien dialect dominated local commerce, with shop signs on Thalang Road – then the economic hub – primarily written in this language. As the tin-mining industry declined, tourism emerged as Phuket's next primary economic driver. According to Pathanasin and Jittasatian (2020), the tourism industry gradually caused the prominence of Hokkien to be replaced with languages spoken by tourists, such as Central Thai, English, and Mandarin. For the next few decades, Phuket would become a major tourist destination, generating numerous job opportunities and attracting migrants from other Thai provinces, neighboring countries, and western expatriates with significant socioeconomic statuses. However, despite this wide diversity, inter-ethnic conflict is not an issue in Phuket. Instead, this diversity is reflected in the variety of languages visible in public spaces.

Pathanasin and Jittasatian (2020) described that the local residents in Phuket typically speak both the southern Thai dialect and the standard Thai dialect. Foreign residents, on the other hand, speak their mother tongues which include a variety of Chinese dialects, French, German and Russian. In addition, there are also many resident workers from neighboring countries who speak Burmese, Cambodian and Karen. In terms of intercultural communication, the

central Thai dialect is the lingua franca used among locals and non-locals from neighboring countries, while English secures its status as a lingua franca among Thais and foreigners. Mandarin Chinese, the language of business, is occasionally spoken between Thai and Chinese customers. These characteristics of language use serve as guidelines for the upcoming analysis and contribute to understanding the target audiences of the shop signs in this area. As with the current research, the study aims to analyze the LL of Phuket to see how languages in signage have changed and shifted towards tourist-favored languages. In addition, it will show how shop owners express their ethnic identities through their business signs. Also, this study seeks to investigate the extent to which language policy influences language in the public space. To meet these goals, the two most popular tourist-populated streets in Phuket were chosen as the study sites, namely, Thalang Road in Phuket Town and Bangla Road in Patong Beach. Images of signs from the two areas were collected and analyzed with the results of the analysis providing current indications of Phuket's multilinguistic nature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The linguistic landscape, a brief background development

LL analysis is the study of the language used in visible manifestations in societal contexts as defined by Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 25):

> "The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration."

The term 'linguistic landscape' was first used by Landry and Bourhis in their 1997 study on how languages in public spaces reflect people's attitudes towards languages that they use. In early iterations of the framework, LL studies were almost entirely location-based. Researchers employed different methodologies, mainly quantitative approaches, to analyze the LL in chosen locations with the aim of understanding and/or comparing languages used in those locations. For example, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) analyzed patterns of language used on signs in three different areas of Israel which were dominated by residents of different religious and political affiliations; Huebner (2006) analyzed the influence of English on Thai signs in Bangkok's commercial areas; Backhaus (2006) surveyed differences between government and private sector signs in Japan with regard to the government's policy on language in signs; and Cenoz and Gorter (2006) investigated how governments' language policies differently affect minority languages in two European countries: Frisian in The Netherlands and Basque in Spain. In this first wave of LL studies, sample sites were purposively chosen to represent multilingualism in specific linguistic communities. Data in these studies were also collected manually using basic technologies such as digital cameras and Google maps.

Later, LL studies extended into different social dimensions. For example, tourism in the LL of Ireland's tourist towns was the focus in Kallen (2009), while Coulmas (2009) analyzed the functions of languages appearing in selected historical sites i.e., the Codex Hammarabi of the

Babylon, the Rosetta Stone in Egypt and the Taj Mahal in India. Also, relationships between social factors such as language, social identity, policy and globalization have been examined in several LL studies. For example, Dagenais et al. (2009) used LL projects to increase language contact among young children living in a multicultural society; and Curtin (2009) examined the national identities of Taiwanese in Taipei against Chinese-ness in her LL study.

Although a variety of research topics have emerged under the LL umbrella, it was unclear what theory would dominate LL analysis. According to Gorter and Cenoz (2020), Spolsky proposed in his 2009 article that the semiotic approach should be the main theoretical framework for LL despite several approaches that had been employed. In addition, data had been collected through mixed methods such as interviews (Malinowski, 2009) and document surveys (Backhaus, 2009). Computers were used to process the large quantities of data often involved. For example, Barni and Bagna (2009) employed the MapGeoLing 1.0.1 software to analyze data across multiple dimensions such as ethnicity and income.

At present, several studies show LL being utilized in new ways. Researchers have shown interest in how languages have been used publicly not only on permanent signs (i.e., shop and government signs) but also in temporary signage. Gorter and Cenoz (2020) point out that the widespread use of digital signage could be a challenge for LL studies because they can change rapidly. In education, a LL study (Li et al., 2022) has been used to support cultural studies as an extension to basic language teaching. Strange (2022) has used the LL approach to analyze ideas of identity and gender equality in a political campaign in Ireland. Lu et al. (2022) collected their data using a geographic information system (GIS) to map patterns of languages used according to the socioeconomic levels of citizens in a US city.

In summary, LL studies have evolved from a sub-field of sociolinguistics into a framework that can be integrated with other fields of study; theories and methodologies have been developed over decades to be responsive to diverse research aims.

Previous LL studies

Languages appearing in the public spaces of multilingual societies have different roles which can be understood by LL analysis. This section aims to provide background overview of LL analyses done in selected multilingual societies, compiled from previous studies as a basis for the current study.

According to Schmitt (2018), there are two levels of multilingualism in LL studies: micro and macro levels. Micro multilingualism refers to a sign containing more than one language. At the micro-level, studies on LL can explain the choice of languages on a single sign. On the other hand, macro multilingualism refers to a public area where the linguistic diversity of a given community can be seen and portrayed by LL studies. Schmitt claims that there are significant forces at work for the choice of languages on signs. First, language policy and language legislation govern majority of the language choices on signs. For instance, in Belgium, where there is more than one official language, the government has legislated for Dutch, French and German to be included on government signs such as at train stations and airports.

Second, pragmatism also drives language choice, often English in this era of globalization. As can be seen in the work of Kretzer (2022), the English language dominates the LL at tourist sites in South Africa despite the promotion of a multilingual policy in that country. Thirdly, indexical force refers to the use of languages to express the ethnic identity of the sign's creator (e.g., shop owners). This could be a result of political situations or language activism as in the cases of Quebec, Canada and tourist attractions in Ireland.

LL studies in Thailand

There have been several studies on the linguistic landscape of Thailand. All of them were conducted in major urban areas around the country, for example, in Bangkok (Huebner, 2006), Chiang Mai (Thongtong, 2016), Hat Yai (Vivas-Peraza, 2020), Ranong (Karanyadech et al., 2023) and Rayong (Bangkom, 2024).

The first LL research in Thailand was undertaken by Huebner (2006) who collected images of 613 signs from 15 neighborhoods in Bangkok to analyze the city's linguistic. His results also reveal discrepancies between languages on government signs and commercial signs. A significant finding is that English-Thai mixing can be seen at the levels of syntax, lexicon, orthography, pronunciation and phonology. Huebner discusses how Thai is influenced by English on signs in Bangkok. The sign creators used these English-influenced features to add a cosmopolitan flair to the signs. Following Huebner's guidance, Thongtong (2016) studied the LL of Nimmanhemin Road in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. She reported that different language strategies were employed in sign creation there; for example, transliteration was used to represent modernity, lexical blending was used to create uniqueness and give general information about products, and a hybrid syntactic structure could also be seen in accordance with Huebner (2006)'s results.

In southern Thailand, Vivas-Peraza (2020) analyzed the LL of the district of Hat Yai in Songkla. She purposely chose three different areas and took pictures of signs to investigate their language functions and the predominant language on those signs. The results indicated that while Thai was the predominant language in government areas, English was the predominant language for private businesses. As noted above, Huebner (2006) described English-Thai language mixing in public spaces in Bangkok as evidence of the influence of English on the LL. On the other hand, Vivas-Peraza (2020) viewed this phenomenon as the use of a Thai variety of English called 'Tinglish'. She claimed that the LL could be seen as giving rise to the development of a new variety of World Englishes used by Thai speakers. Additionally, Choeirod and Chanthao (2023) studied public signs along Patong Beach in Phuket and found that tax laws affected the size and position of languages on signs. Also, languages on signs were associated with business types and target customers. For instance, English, Chinese and Russian often appear on the signs of massage parlors and spa establishments, because Chinese and Russian tourists are their main customers.

In the eastern side of the country, Bangkom (2024) used LL analysis in teaching and learning activities in the province of Rayong. In her study, she assigned 19 Thai students to survey signs in two areas of the province. At the end of the project, students could distinguish language

atmospheres of residential and tourism areas. Results showed that the LL approach could also be used to raise students' awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity within their community.

With regards to Chinese influence on Thailand's linguistic landscape, Wu and Techasan (2016) studied the LL of Chinatown, Bangkok, where 274 photos of frontward signs were collected along Yaowarat Road. They analyzed all of the photos to see how the LL reflected the residents there. Predictably, the results of the analysis showed that Thai, English and Chinese writings were the three most important languages on shop signs in the area. A total of 36 shop owners and shop employees were interviewed. It was found that most shop owners were descendants of Chinese immigrants. In addition, each language on the signs studied carried its own function. Thai, the most frequently used language on the signs, provided information for Thai customers. Teochew (a Chinese dialect that shares the writing system as Mandarin), on the other hand, has symbolic functions that help express the identity of the community and appeal to tourists at the same time. Lastly, English served as the lingua franca for foreign visitors. In another study, Karanyadech et al. (2023) analyzed the structure of Chinese names on shop signs in an old market area of Ranong in southern Thailand. It was found that 58.2% of the names were in single structures containing names, i.e., the shop owners' names. The other 41.8% of the shop signs were in mixed patterns, i.e., containing the shop owners' names and their corresponding products and/or services.

Overall, research on the LLs in Thailand have reported that Thai, English and Chinese writings are the three most frequently seen languages (Huebner, 2006; Thongtong, 2016; Vivas-Peraza, 2020; Wu & Techasan, 2016). The predominant language is obviously Thai since it is the national language of the kingdom. English shows its status as the global lingua franca, while Chinese writing has its place on many commercial signs. It can be seen at this point that there are three main purposes for a language to be used on signages. First, the language must be able to serve a communicative function. Second, the language can be used to express the ethnic identity of the sign owners. Lastly, there are also language policies that govern language choices on signs. Thus, it is challenging for analysts to portray a community via explanations of the languages used on signs in public places.

METHODOLOGY

The sites

To study multilingualism in Phuket via LL analysis, two popular areas were selected: Thalang Road and Bangla Road. Thalang Road was chosen because it is the most popular walking street in Phuket Town. The street also connects into Soi Rommanee, which is a sub-street of Thalang road, making a total commercial length of approximately 650 meters. This street runs along the oldest commercial center in Phuket and is famous for its Sino-Portuguese architectural style. In addition, the older part of Phuket Town, where Thalang Road is found, has also been listed by UNESCO as a City of Gastronomy (Phuket City Municipality, 2016). The road is arguably the most famous heritage site for tourists to visit in Phuket.
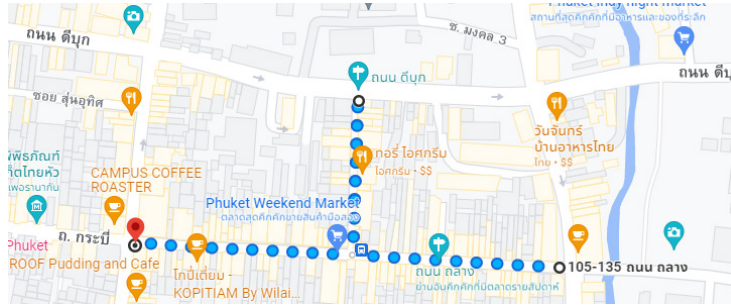
Figure 1 Thalang Road
(Source: https://www.google.com/maps)

Bangla Road, on the other hand, is the most popular walking street on Patong Beach and is approximately 350 meters long. The road is famous for nightlife activities and is one of the most well-known destinations to foreign tourists. In 2023, Bangla Road was the only area chosen under a new campaign to boost tourism after Covid-19 by allowing businesses to open until 4 am. (Bangkokbiznews, 2022).
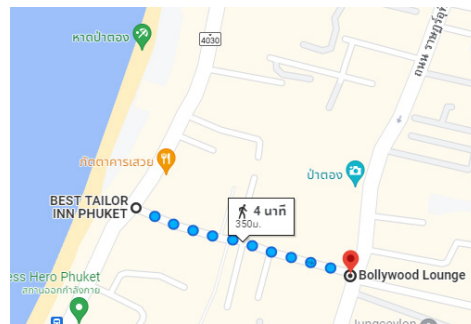

Figure 2 Bangla Road
(Source: https://www.google.com/maps)

Both Thalang Road and Bangla Road are distinct in both location and features. Thalang Road is known for its cultural significance, while Bangla Road is famous for its vibrant nightlife. Both roads attract large numbers of pedestrian tourists each year, the majority of whom are foreigners. The LLs of both sites have therefore evolved to meet the needs of both residents and visitors, with elements drawn from different languages. As a result, Thalang Road and Bangla Road are ideal locations for conducting a LL analysis in Phuket.

Data collection

Using a Huawei smartphone, the researcher took photographs of all commercial signs on both streets. The signs selected for this study consisted of permanent signs and major signs of individually owned shops. Government signs and franchised shops were excluded. Government signs are usually standardized and most likely, would not convey the identity of a specific locale. Moreover, their fixed and predictable nature limits their relevance for in-depth analysis. Similarly, franchised shop signs follow boilerplate designs across all branches, meaning they

do not reflect the identities of business operators or cater to the unique characteristics of a specific area. Data collection on Thalang Road was done in day time because the shops on this road are most active during the day. On the other hand, data on Bangla Road was collected at night when businesses were most active.

Then, each photo was loaded into an MS Access database, together with key details such as location, language(s) displayed, and types of business among other notes. The database was converted using MS Excel for qualitative analysis. For the best understanding of the data, the author interviewed ten shop owners or staff from each road. The interviewees in this study were chosen using convenient sampling, and participation in the study was entirely voluntary.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis

All signs were analyzed quantitatively to compare the number of signs in each area. They were then classified into three categories, namely, monolingual/bi-lingual/multilingual, and a count of each category was made. This analysis shows the relationship between languages used in signs on each street. Next, the prominent language was defined as having the largest font size on the sign. If sizes were equal, the position of the lettering was considered, with central lettering denotating position of the prominent language. The number of prominent languages on signs of the two roads were compared. The comparison helped to understand the status of each language in relation to multilingualism and tourism in both areas.

Qualitative analysis

A qualitative analysis was done by following Schmitt (2018)'s principle of multilingualism in LL, with particular reference to the micro and macro levels of multilingualism. At the micro level, languages that were chosen on the signs were surveyed. Then at the macro level, languages on these signs were analyzed to understand their functions. Although languages on signs can have multiple functions, according to Schmitt (2018), they can be classified into three main types: to express ethnic identities, to attract potential clients, and to respond to language policies.

To reaffirm the results of the analysis, the author conducted individual interviews with shop owners or staff to glean more information on the signs' creations. Questions in the interviews mainly focused on the origin of the signs, choices of languages, meanings of words in foreign languages, i.e., Chinese and Russian languages, and who their target customers are. Data from the interviews ultimately provided a better understanding of the signs, which included knowing the correct pronunciations for the shop names.

RESULTS

Quantitative results

Language distribution in commercial signs by areas

Businesses on the two roads reflect different tourist activities. On Thalang Road, the largest percentage of businesses (41.8%) consisted of souvenir shops, while the second largest percentage (23.0%) consisted of restaurants. Other businesses include accommodation premises, fashion houses, goldsmith shops, pharmacies, law offices, etc. On the other hand, most businesses (63.2%) on Bangla Road sell food and beverage (e.g., pubs, restaurants and bars). Other businesses comprise of are massage parlors, pharmacies, videogame stores, tattoo parlors, etc.

The shop signs in the data were classified according to language to understand the multicultural aspects of each area. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
No. of signs categorized by the languages on the signs

		Thalang Rd.	Bangla Rd.	**Total**
Monolingual signs				
English		16 (13.6%)	18 (26.5%)	34 (18.3%)
Thai		20 (17.0%)	0	20 (10.8%)
Chinese		4 (3.4%)	0	4 (2.2%)
French		0	2 (2.9%)	2 (1.1%)
	(Total)	**40 (34.1%)**	**20 (29.4%)**	**60 (32.4%)**
Bilingual signs				
Thai & English		40 (34.1%)	42 (61.7%)	82 (44.3%)
Thai & Chinese		10 (8.5%)	0	10 (5.4%)
English & Russian		1 (0.8%)	0	1 (0.5%)
English & Chinese		0	1 (1.5%)	1 (0.5%)
	(Total)	**51 (43.5%)**	**43 (63.2%)**	**94 (50.8%)**
Multilingual signs				
Thai & English & Chinese		24 (20.5%)	1 (1.5%)	25 (13.5%)
Thai & English & Arabic		2 (1.7%)	2 (2.9%)	4 (2.2%)
Thai & English & Chinese & Russian		0	2 (2.9%)	2 (1.1%)
	(Total)	**26 (22.2%)**	**5 (7.3%)**	**31 (16.7%)**
TOTAL		**117 (100%)**	**68 (100%)**	**185 (100%)**

It can be seen in Table 1 that the number of signs on Thalang Road is higher than that on Bangla Road, 117 and 68 respectively. Also, Table 1 shows that the percentage of bilingual signs is the highest at 50.8% with most of them being English-Thai. A significant difference is seen in the monolingual signs on the two areas. The largest percentage of monolingual signs on Thalang Road are in Thai (17.0%) whereas those on Bangla Road are in English (26.5%). As can be seen from the data, English is the most used on signs when only one language is chosen (18.3%). This result suggests that the main target audience of these signs consists of foreign tourists, which would also correspond to the high number of international tourists in Phuket. In addition, most multilingual signs in the data contained Thai, English and Chinese writings

(13.5%). This result is expected since the three languages are the three most prominent languages in the country due to political and socioeconomic factors.

Prominent languages

To understand the choice of languages on commercial signs in multilingual communities in Phuket, each sign was classified according to the prominent language that was used on each sign. Table 2 below presents the language prominence on bilingual and multilingual signs in the data.

Table 2
Comparison of prominent languages by street

Sign characteristics	Street (No, %)		
	Thalang Rd.	Bangla Rd.	Total
Bilingual			
English	14 (27.5%)	41 (95.3%)	55 (58.5%)
Thai	31 (60.7%)	2 (4.6%)	33 (35.1%)
Chinese	5 (9.8%)		5 (5.3%)
Russian	1 (1.9%)		1 (1.1%)
(Total)	51 (100%)	43 (100%)	94 (100%)
Multilingual			
English	3 (11.5%)	3 (60%)	6 (19.3%)
Thai	20 (76.9%)	1 (20%)	21 (67.8%)
Chinese	2 (7.7%)	1 (20%)	3 (9.7%)
Arabic	1 (3.8%)		1 (3.2%)
(Total)	26 (100%)	5 (100%)	31 (100%)

It can be seen in Table 2 that Thai is often the most prominent language in both bilingual and multilingual signs on Thalang Road at 60.7% and 76.9% respectively. On Bangla Road, English is the most prominent language on bilingual signs at 95.3% and at 60% on multilingual signs. The Chinese language has a prominent status in both areas as well, but in smaller percentages. Since the main function of the signs is to facilitate communication, the results suggest that both English and Thai play critical roles as lingua francas in these commercial areas. The reason for the different percentages of prominent languages between the two areas is tied to the history of each commercial area in Phuket. Thalang Road has been the main business street in Phuket Town for many years, where many shops have operated and served the locals for generations. Therefore, it came as no surprise that Thai was found to be the most prominent language there. On the other hand, Bangla Road is a newer commercial area that is considered more attractive to foreigners than to the locals. To communicate with the myriad of foreigners visiting this street, it is highly understandable that English was made the prominent language in this area.

Qualitative result

Next, interview data from the study were analyzed qualitatively to understand the sociocultural aspects of the multilingual community in Phuket. Based on a discussion by Schmitt (2018) regarding the most important driving forces behind the choice of languages on signs, the data

was analyzed according to three perspectives. This includes how the ethnic identities of the sign creators are expressed, what strategies were used to reach the target readers, and how language legislation influences language choice and language prominence on signs.

Language to express ethnic identities

From the results, three main strategies for expressing the ethnic identities of the shopkeepers could be found in the data: proper names, cultural expressions, and the use of foreign scripts. These strategies are elaborated below.

<u>Proper names</u>

Figure 3 Sin & Lee

Figure 3 above shows a signboard with the shop owner's name or family name on it. It is also multilingual in nature, which is a common feature of the signages on Thalang Road. The English name 'Sin & Lee' is transliterated into Thai ชิน แอนด์ ลี [sɪn æn lɪː], and the Chinese characters 利 永 新 [xīn yǒng lì] can be read from right to left in the Hokkien dialect as [sin éng lī], which in turn, can be pronounced to resemble 'Sin and Lee' and literally means 'new forever benefit'. Thai looks to be the prominent language on the sign in Figure 3, as it is centrally positioned and also has the largest characters. During the interview, the owner said that this shop was established long ago by his great-grandfather who migrated from China. The shop's founder named this place after his two daughters: 'Sin' and 'Lee'. The shop's founder also spoke the Chinese Hokkien dialect. Later, the use of this dialect declined in the family as each generation passed. The present generation speaks Thai as their mother tongue and cannot speak any variety of Chinese. The shop owner commented that shop signs on Thalang Road typically appear in three languages: English, Thai, and a variety of Chinese.

Signs on Thalang Road show that the community has a long history of being a multilingual community. Also, the signs exemplify the language change in the community. Hokkien used to be an important dialect in the community and was often seen on signs of shops established three or four generations ago. Currently, the use of Hokkien has declined in the community, and signs that still show it do so for indexical reasons rather than communication purposes. Signs of newer shops do not have words expressed in Hokkien anymore, it seems.

Cultural expressions

Figure 4 Grand Tarboosh

Figure 4 shows a signboard for the restaurant "Grand Tarboosh", located on Bangla Road. The multilingual sign displays text in English, Arabic, and Thai. This Arab-style bar serves Arabic cuisine and features a kebab booth outside. According to the staff, the restaurant is operated by Egyptians and attracts customers primarily from Arabic-speaking countries. The word "tarboosh" refers to a traditional hat worn by men of all social classes throughout the Ottoman Empire (Chico, 2013). Historically, the tarboosh has been a prominent symbol of Middle Eastern culture, representing dignity, tradition, and heritage. Its use in the restaurant's name reinforces the cultural authenticity and signals to passers-by that it is a bar that welcomes Middle Eastern customers in particular.

Using foreign scripts

The use of foreign scripts was found to be a strategy in expressing the ethnic identities of some shops. The foreign scripts found in the data mostly consist of traditional Chinese characters which are not as commonly used as simplified Chinese nowadays. The interview results revealed that these Chinese characters were proper nouns or words with positive meanings e.g., luck and prosperity. They were transliterated into Thai or English even though they do not have any meaning in Thai or English. Thus, the foreign scripts were used to express the cultural heritage of the shop owners. This was previously presented in Figure 3. Another example is presented in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 Ban Chin Thye

Figure 5 (Ban Chin Thye) was taken from Thalang Road. The Chinese characters 萬 振 泰 [wàn zhèn tài] were transliterated into Thai บ่าน จิ้น ท่าย [ban dʒɪn ɵaɪ:] and English 'Ban Chin Thye' based on the Hokkien dialect. The Chinese characters literally mean 'full of, peacefulness, Thailand'. The use of Chinese words with positive meanings in shop signs is a common practice and corresponds to the results of Karanyadech et al. (2023) where these words were used to reflect their Chinese beliefs and philosophies in doing business.

From the interview, the shop's owner is currently in the fourth generation of his family in Phuket. The shop was originally opened by his great-grandfather who migrated from China. Originally, the shop sold mining equipment. The business has changed over time and is now a souvenir shop. The owner said that he and his siblings cannot speak the Hokkien dialect, but their father could speak some.

In sum, results show three language strategies used to express the ethnic identities of the business owners. Firstly, proper names related to the owners are used to express their ownership. Secondly, cultural items are presented on signs to convey the culture behind their business. Lastly, foreign scripts, especially traditional Chinese characters were used in Thalang Road to express and pay homage to the cultural background of the owner's family.

Language strategies for commercialism

From the results, three language strategies were found and used to reach and appeal to particular groups of customers. These strategies are further elaborated below:

Using foreign texts

It was found that at times, messages were delivered to target customers in their native languages. Examples can be seen in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6 Duangjai

In Figure 6 (Duangjai), only the shop name ดวงใจ [duaŋ dʒaj] was written in Thai whereas the service information 'massage' was written in four languages: Mandarin, English, Thai and Russian. The Chinese text 傳統按摩 [chuán tǒng àn mó] and the Russian text *Традиционный массаж* [Traditsionnyĭ massazh] both mean 'traditional massage'. This finding corresponds to that of Choeirod and Chanthao (2023) that massage parlor signs in Patong usually appear in three languages. The English language is chosen here as a lingua franca. The Chinese and Russian texts, however, were chosen to target and reach out to Chinese and Russian tourists, the main target customers of massage businesses in Patong.

Font-sizes

Font sizes also serve as a strategic commercial tool in signage. In bilingual and multilingual signs, the language targeting the most important customer base is typically displayed in the largest font. Analysis revealed that font size plays a more significant role than placement in attracting attention. English text was often found to appear in the largest font size for visibility, even when other languages were presented on the sign, as shown in Figure 4 (Grand Tarboosh) above and as illustrated in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7 Torry's

In Figure 7, the shop name 'Torry' and description 'ice cream boutique' are written in larger font sizes than the Thai script, despite the English text being positioned below its Thai counterpart. The use of a larger font for the English text, therefore, is aimed at attracting international customers in the commercial area.

Gender-related terms

At night, Bangla Road is often a bustling street known for its vibrant entertainment venues, including pubs and bars. As observed in the LL of this study and illustrated in Figures 8 and 9 below, gender-related terms are also used strategically to attract the attention of foreign male tourists, who constitute the primary customer base in the area.

Figure 8 Ruby

Figure 9 Heroes

Figures 8 and 9 clearly illustrate how the signs target male potential customers. In Figure 8 (Ruby), the phrase "Gentlemen's Club" signals that the establishment caters primarily to male clients. In Figure 9 (Heroes), the word "Heroes" conveys a sense of nobility and courage, signaling again the catering for male customers. The owner, who has been running this bar for ten years and who has a military background, serves both local and international tourists, all seeking a drink. The use of "Heroes" on the sign seems to align with the male-dominated atmosphere of Bangla Road's nightlife scene.

In summary, the results reveal three key language strategies intended to capture the attention of a variety of customers in these tourist areas. Firstly, foreign texts are employed to communicate crucial business information to their target customers. Secondly, large font sizes are deliberately chosen for the target customers' languages to attract their attention. Lastly, gender-related terms are also used specifically to attract male customers, particularly on Bangla Road.

Language legislation

The Thai language is the only national language in the Kingdom of Thailand. However, there is no overall regulation stating that Thai is a 'must' to be displayed on commercial signs, but the government has issued a tax regulation regarding languages on signs (Ministry of Interior, 2020). According to Ministerial regulation of Sign Taxes B.E. 2563, businesses using signs with Thai only will be taxed at five Baht per 500 square cm of floor area, businesses using signs with Thai positioned above foreign languages will be taxed at 26 Baht per 500 square cm, and businesses displaying signs without Thai or with Thai in lower positions will be taxed 50 Baht per 500 square cm. The tax is calculated and paid annually.

Therefore, it is common to see shop names transliterated into Thai and posted in very small sizes on an upper corner to reduce tax liabilities. This type of bilingual sign is the most common in the data.

The results indicate that language policy was an important driving force behind the extent of multilingualism by providing tax incentives for signs to contain the Thai language. Although the language policy in the present study does not derive from language activists, processes to support language change or the conservation of the community's language, it can be understood that the reason behind the tax regulation was not only to accommodate the locals, but also to reinforce Thai nationalism.

DISCUSSIONS

Multilingualism

Micro-level

At the micro-level, the results of the study explained the choice of languages on signs. The results indicated that there were three important languages chosen in making a sign namely:

Thai, English and Chinese writing. This finding corresponds to previous LL studies in Thailand (Huebner, 2006; Vivas-Peraza, 2020; Wu & Techasan, 2016). Reasons for choosing any of these languages were investigated.

First of all, standard Thai secured its place in the LL of the current study by being the national language of the country. As a lingua franca of people in the kingdom, standard Thai was often the very first choice for sign creators. When the prominent language was not Thai, a spot for Thai was included anyway usually due to tax considerations. This finding corresponds to that of Choeirod and Chanthao (2023), who also found such text to be positioned similarly on signs in Patong. However, the language policy does not determine the prominence of languages, unlike the cases of Japan and Quebec as reported by Backhaus (2009). The results showed that the Thai language was commonly included on signs to qualify for lower tax rates.

Despite Thai being the national language, the results revealed that English is actually more common in signs. Being the global lingua franca, the English language was given priority in the LL of commercial areas in Phuket because obviously, foreign customers are the main target customers in Phuket. Including the English language on signs not only facilitates international communication but also helps modernize the business image.

The other important languages chosen on signs in the current study are Mandarin and the Hokkien dialect. As with English, Mandarin serves the purpose of communication whereas Hokkien expresses ethnic identity. The results revealed that when the shop owners wanted to communicate in Mandarin, they would use simplified Chinese scripts; on the other hand, if they wanted to convey their Hokkien heritage, they would use traditional Chinese scripts. The results revealed that business sectors in Phuket, especially the vintage commercial areas on Thalang Road, were previously dominated by Hokkien Chinese migrants.

Macro-level

The LL analysis also helped us to understand the community at a macro level. As described above, varieties of Chinese, English and Thai were all used to express the ethnic identities of shops, but the choice of the languages could also be for business purposes. The multilingual signs found in the data confirmed the existence of a multilingual community in Phuket, with local and international cultures. In terms of international cultures, it was found that Chinese culture and Western culture have both played influential roles in forming the multilingual community in Phuket for generations. That is to say, the influence of the Hokkien Chinese has shaped the local identities of Phuket. Through businesses, the Hokkien Chinese in olden times adapted and localized the Peranakan culture, creating a unique blend of cultures that defines the locals of Phuket today. English has also been another dynamic force of business on the island, and has become the most powerful language for Phuket's current economy. However, it is interesting to note that even though the results have demonstrated the strength of English as a global lingua franca, it was not the only lingua franca in Phuket. In this multilingual community, Mandarin has gained the status of a second lingua franca, whilst Russian is slowly becoming another commonly spoken language.

Despite the fact that there is a large number of immigrants from neighboring countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia living and working in Phuket, the languages of these minorities do not exist on signs in the tourist areas in Phuket. This is considered to result from the low socio-economic status of these minorities. Consequently, the languages of minority groups from neighboring countries also do not hold any economic status in the commercial areas of Phuket.

The collected data has also shown marked language changes in Phuket. Thalang Road which is the oldest business street in Phuket, has a good number of signs containing varieties of the Chinese language. Interestingly, the analysis revealed that old shop signs created by the first group of Chinese migrants who settled in Phuket were read and transliterated into English and Thai using their original dialects, mainly Hokkien. The Chinese scripts on these signs were often written in traditional Chinese and helped express the shop owners' identities through proper names (Figure 3: Sin & Lee) or Chinese words with positive meanings (Figure 5: Ban Chin Thye). Centuries later, businesses were opened by Thai entrepreneurs who were not original residents in the community, and they would often employ local elements in their shop signs, such as Chino (derived from Sino-), Old Town, Ngo Ka Ki (a walkway in the Sino-Portuguese building) and Baba (half-Chinese and half-Malay children in Peranakan culture). In addition, the Chinese writings on more recent signs were read and transliterated into English and Thai based on Mandarin and simplified Chinese. It could be said that the purpose of the Chinese writings on these signs has shifted over time, from representing the ethnic identities of shopkeepers in the past to serving a more commercial purpose in the present now. It appears that the older Chinese dialects on the signs have been maintained to express and pay homage to the present owners' ethnic identities, even though they do not speak the dialect and there are few target readers nowadays. This finding corresponds to the findings of Wu and Techasan (2016) who noticed a language shift within the Chinese communities of Thailand.

From the data, it could also be seen that English is a prominent language in Phuket and has been well assimilated into the community since tourism began in the area. This becomes more evident as newer shops continue to post signs that contain both English and Mandarin to boost their businesses, especially on Bangla Road. For Thalang Road, the LL analysis has indicated that the street is truly a cultural heritage site. Bangla Road, on the other hand, is a nightlife entertainment venue, especially for male westerners. Considering that each area has a different target clientele, the messages on signs were designed differently for them. On Thalang Road, local traditional culture such as Chinese words with positive meanings were commonplace in the LL. But on Bangla Road, western-oriented food and drinks as well as gender-related terms were more prevalent on shop signs. These discrepancies make Phuket an interesting destination for visitors because it is able to offer different flavors of experience from around the globe.

Implications

The results of this study do not only contribute to the field of sociolinguistics, but also to Phuket's community in several beneficial ways. First, they can be useful data for the local administration in planning the island's development. After all, the results have indicated that different tourist areas have different target customers and offer different tourist activities.

Therefore, it is recommended that important information, such as traffic signs, notices, and warnings, be presented in multiple languages. Foreign language training, especially in English, Mandarin and Russian, should be arranged for government officers and medical staff to meet the demands of tourists in the province.

Furthermore, the results highlight the uniqueness of Phuket's local history, reminding residents of their distinct cultural heritage. This awareness may inspire people to preserve their traditions through their choice of language on public signage. Preserving local cultural elements is essential for sustainable development, and one should not simply conform to rapid changes in society.

Lastly, the results can also benefit entrepreneurs interested in establishing businesses in Phuket by providing insights into the target customer bases in different areas. This information could help business owners determine which languages should be included and prioritized to effectively attract their target customers in Phuket's diverse and international business landscape.

Limitations and further research

In conducting this research, the researcher faced two significant limitations. Firstly, the language mixing between Thai and Chinese languages was not analyzed deeply in the current study. Secondly, the two areas chosen in this study were not the only areas where there are many foreign residents and tourists. The results might be slightly different if the data had been collected from other tourist-heavy areas in Phuket such as Koh Siray where there is a large number of immigrant workers.

For further study, a taxonomy of the language mixing between Thai and Chinese languages could be analyzed to see the influence of Chinese languages on Thai. Alternatively, an extended LL project could also be conducted to cover other areas in Phuket and the Andaman provinces to identify trends in language use and change in these communities on a larger scale.

CONCLUSION

The shop signs from two popular streets in Phuket, namely, Thalang Road and Bangla Road, were analyzed and compared to understand the multilingualism in those areas. The results showed a discrepancy in the LL between the two roads. Languages in these two public streets reflected different tourist activities and target customers. The LL on Thalang Road portrayed more of the local traditional culture of Phuket, whereas LL on Bangla Road emphasized nightlife entertainment. Additionally, the results also revealed changes in the LL of Phuket from the past to the present, reflecting shifts in the island's multilingualism. English has gradually gained importance as the de facto language of communication in line with modernization. Meanwhile, Hokkien has declined considerably and has been replaced by Mandarin. These foreign languages now compete with the Thai language in the LL, influencing the linguistic dynamics of the island.

From the quantitative results, English was used with the highest frequency in monolingual signs, whereas Thai-English combinations were used with the highest frequency in bilingual signs. In addition, Chinese writings were frequently found alongside English and Thai. This finding reflects the trend of English as a lingual franca with Mandarin as another language of emerging economic importance.

From the qualitative results, three important forces were revealed in the choice of languages on signs in the study. First, it was found that tax incentives led to the store owners' decision to reserve a place for Thai on signs, even though the Thai scripts did not have a prominent status on them. Second, it was found that the ethnic identities of shops on Thalang Road have been expressed differently over time. Additionally, the use of foreign scripts and varying font sizes in bilingual and multilingual signs has been employed as a commercial strategy to communicate with and capture the attention of international customers. In addition, gender-related terms were also found to be a significant strategy to attract male clients particularly on Bangla Road.

These results are beneficial to the community of Phuket in several ways. By taking note of the LL changes identified in this study, the local administration involved in planning and development, the tourism industry and eager entrepreneurs could all benefit from being more sensitive and less disruptive when attempting to commune or fit in with the local and culturally rich domain of Phuket.

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