

Linguistic Landscape of the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community: Language Use and Language Choice on Shop Signs

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Abstract

This study examines the linguistic landscape of the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community in Chanthaburi Province, Thailand. Using a mixed-methods design, the study analyzed 71 shop signs and conducted semi-structured interviews with seven local shop owners. The sign analysis revealed that monolingual signs were the most common type, accounting for 74.6% of the dataset. Monolingual Thai signs formed the largest group at 56.3%, followed by Thai-English bilingual signs at 21.1%. Thai-Chinese signs were rare, making up only 2.8% of the sample, and only one Thai-Chinese-English trilingual sign was found. In terms of visual prominence, the Thai language was usually displayed more prominently than English on bilingual signs. Interview data suggested that shop owners' language choices were shaped by both practical and symbolic concerns. The Thai language was associated with local identity, family memory, and the heritage atmosphere of the community. English was used to support tourist accessibility, online searchability, and business image. Chinese appeared mainly as a marker of cultural heritage rather than as an everyday language of commercial communication. The findings suggest that the linguistic landscape of the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community remains strongly anchored in Thai, while English and Chinese are used in relation to tourism, branding, and heritage identity.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, heritage tourism, shop signs, language choice, Chanthaboon Riverfront Community

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Introduction

Linguistic landscape research examines how languages are displayed in public spaces and how such displays reflect wider social, cultural and economic processes. Since the work of Landry and Bourhis (1997), public signs have been understood not only as sources of information but also as symbolic markers of identity, status, and belonging. The languages appeared on shop signs, street signs, advertisements and public notices can indicate which groups are being addressed, which languages are given visibility and how a particular place represents itself to residents and visitors. Signs communicate meaning not only through written language but also through font size, position, layout, color, image and other visual features (Gorter, 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

Public signs mediate between local communities and visitors in tourism settings. Shop signs help tourists identify products and services, and they also create a particular image of place. Previous studies in Thailand and other Asian contexts have shown that local or national languages often remain dominant in public signage in tourism areas (Low, 2022; Savski, 2021; Shen, 2022). However, in highly commercialized or internationalized tourist areas, English is highly visible and sometimes more prominent than national languages on commercial signs (Mansoor et al., 2023; Rungswang, 2023; Sari et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the role of English and other foreign languages in public signage depends strongly on the local context.

Although the studies of linguistic landscape have been increasingly prevalent, less attention has been paid to smaller heritage communities where tourism is developing but local history, family businesses, and cultural preservation remain central to everyday life.

In such communities, language choices can signal authenticity, local rootedness and cultural continuity. At the same time, the use of English or other foreign languages may suggest modernity, accessibility, and international orientation (Lu et al., 2020; Pathanasin, 2025). Language choice on signs may not be shaped by tourism alone. It may also be influenced by family memory, local ownership, historical identity, architectural heritage, and the desire to maintain the cultural atmosphere of the place.

The Chanthaboon Riverfront Community in Chanthaburi Province is one of Thailand's small heritage sites. The community has long been associated with Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese cultural influences. Existing studies have mainly discussed the community in relation to other disciplines, except the linguistic landscape (PhraKhrusamuchinwarawat & Phakdeesaen, 2022; Sangprachan et al., 2026). For this reason, this study aims not only to investigate the linguistic landscape of the community through shop signs and interviews with local shop owners but also to examine the visible patterns of language use on signs and the meanings that shop owners attach to their language choices.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the languages used on shop signs in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community and examine their visual prominence.
2. To investigate the factors influencing shop owners' choices of language on shop signs in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community.

Research Questions

1. What languages appear on shop signs and how visually prominent are they in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community?
2. What factors influence shop owners' decisions regarding language choice on their signs in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community?

Literature Review and Related Studies

Linguistic Landscape, Language Functions, and Tourism

Linguistic landscape refers to the visibility of languages in public space, including shop signs, street signs, advertisements, public notices, and other written displays. Landry and Bourhis (1997) argue that public signs serve both informational and symbolic functions. Informationally, signs help people identify places, services, and boundaries. Symbolically, they show which languages and communities are made visible in a particular space. A language that appears frequently and prominently on public signs can suggest social presence, status, and belonging.

Later studies have expanded the study of linguistic landscape beyond the counting of languages. Gorter (2006) emphasizes that public signs provide insight into everyday multilingual practices while Shohamy and Gorter (2009) point out that signs communicate not only through words but also through visual and semiotic features such as font size, position, color, images and layout. These visual choices are especially important in multilingual signs because they can indicate which language is given greater prominence.

In tourism settings, linguistic landscape is closely connected to communication, identity and place-making. Signs help visitors understand products, services, and directions, but they also shape the image of a destination. English and other foreign languages may be used to increase accessibility and create a modern or international image. Local languages and traditional scripts may be used to signal authenticity, cultural continuity and a sense of place (Lu et al., 2020; Pathanasin, 2025). For this reason, shop signs in heritage communities are not only commercial tools. They also show how local businesses negotiate between tourism development and cultural preservation.

A useful distinction in linguistic landscape research is between top-down and bottom-up signs. Top-down signs are produced by government agencies or institutions while bottom-up signs are produced by individuals, businesses and local communities (Backhaus, 2006).

Since the present study focuses mainly on shop signs, it is concerned primarily with bottom-up signage. These signs are important because they reflect the decisions of local business owners including how they imagine their customers, how they present their businesses and how they position themselves within a changing tourism economy.

Language Choice in Tourist and Heritage Landscapes

Previous studies in Asian tourist and heritage contexts show that the relationship between local languages and English varies across settings. In some places, the local or national language remains visually dominant even when tourism is present. For example, studies of Bang Saen, Hat Yai, and Shaoxing found that Thai or the local national language continued to occupy a central position in public signage while English and other languages appeared in more limited or secondary roles (Low, 2022; Savski, 2021; Shen, 2022; Vivas-Peraza, 2020). These studies suggest that tourism does not automatically lead to the dominance of English. Local identity, language policy and historical context continue to shape the public visibility of languages.

However, other studies show a different pattern in highly internationalized or commercialized tourist areas. On Bangkok's Khaosan Road, English is highly visible and often appears more prominently than Thai on commercial signs (Rungswang, 2023). Similar patterns have been reported in tourism-oriented spaces in Malaysia and Indonesia where English visibility has increased alongside commercial development and international visitor demand (Mansoor et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2024). In these contexts, English functions not only as a language of communication but also as a marker of modernity, mobility, and global commercial appeal.

Shop owners' language choices are shaped by both practical and symbolic concerns. Practically, business owners select languages that they believe their customers can understand. English may be used to communicate with international tourists while Chinese or other languages may be used when businesses expect particular visitor groups. On the symbolic side, language choice can help create a business image. English and multilingual signage may suggest modernity, professionalism or an upmarket identity while local languages may suggest rootedness, authenticity, and cultural continuity (Kim & Ahn, 2023; Pathanasin, 2025; Wang & Gao, 2025).

These studies provide an important background for the present research. They show that linguistic landscapes in tourist areas cannot be explained by tourism alone. The visibility of each language depends on the type of destination, the level of internationalization, the target customers and the meanings that business owners attach to particular languages. This is especially relevant to heritage communities where shop signs may need to balance visitor accessibility with the preservation of local identity.

Chanthaboon Riverfront Community as a Heritage Site

The Chanthaboon Riverfront Community in Chanthaburi Province is one of Thailand's old riverside settlements. Historically, the area developed as a trading community and has long been associated with Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese cultural influences. Previous studies describe the community as a multicultural heritage space where local identity is reflected through architecture, religious life, food, traditional houses and everyday practices (PhraKhrusamuchinwarawat & Phakdeesaen, 2022; Sangprachan et al., 2026).

Although existing studies have examined Chanthaboon in relation to history, tourism, architecture, multicultural coexistence and local ways of life, its linguistic landscape has received limited attention.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design to examine the linguistic landscape of the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community in Chanthaburi Province, Thailand. The study combined photographic data from shop signs with interview data from local shop owners. The photographic data were used to identify the visible patterns of language use on signs while the interviews helped explain why particular languages were chosen.

The Chanthaboon Riverfront Community was selected because it is a historic riverside community with a strong local identity and an increasing role as a cultural tourism destination. This made it a suitable site for examining how language on shop signs reflects both local identity and tourism-related communication.

Research works under the ethical approval under Burapha University, Approval No. IRB2-101/2569. All procedures followed relevant ethical guidelines.

Research Instruments

The main research instruments were a smartphone for collecting photographic data and semi-structured interview questions. The interview questions were constructed based on the language choice on signs, intended customers and reasons for using particular languages by adapting the results from Rungswang (2023).

Data Collection

Data were collected in two stages. First, the researchers conducted a photographic survey of shop signs in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community in early June 2026. Only signs that were publicly visible from the street and readable to visitors were included. Repeated photographs of the same sign were removed. After the data were cleaned, 71 shop signs were included in the final analysis.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven shop owners in the community. The interview questions focused on the reasons for using particular languages, the intended customers, the meanings associated with the shop name or sign and the role of language in business image, accessibility, and local identity.

Participants

Seven shop owners voluntarily participated in this study. The participants represented a range of business types including food and beverage, jewelry, and boutique hospitality with varying years of establishment in the community. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in businesses located within the study site and their willingness to share their perspectives on language choice.

Data Analysis

The photographic data were analyzed quantitatively and descriptively. Each sign was coded according to language category, language combination, business type, and visual prominence. The language categories included monolingual, bilingual, and trilingual signs. Visual prominence was considered through observable features such as font size, position and overall visibility of each language on the sign.

To improve coding consistency, three researchers coded the signs independently. Until agreement was reached, the coded data were then summarized using frequencies and percentages to show the distribution of languages and their visual prominence across different types of businesses.

The interview data were analyzed thematically. The researchers read the interview responses and identified recurring reasons for language choice. These included preserving family and local identity, reaching tourists and wider markets, creating a distinctive business image, improving online visibility and communicating through visual design. The interview findings were used to support and interpret the patterns found in the photographic data.

Findings

To answer research question 1, what languages appear on shop signs, and how visually prominent are they in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community?

A total of 71 shop signs were analyzed. As shown in Table 1, monolingual signs formed the largest group accounting for 53 signs or 74.6% of the data set. Within this group, monolingual Thai signs were the most common with 40 signs or 56.3% of the total. Monolingual English signs appeared 13 times or 18.3%. No monolingual Chinese signs were found.

Bilingual signs accounted for 17 signs or 23.9% of the data set. Most bilingual signs were Thai–English signs which appeared 15 times or 21.1%. Thai–Chinese signs appeared only twice or 2.8%. Only one trilingual sign containing Thai, Chinese and English was found. These results show that Thai remains the main language of shop signs in the community while English and Chinese appear more selectively.

Table 1

Distribution of Signs by Language Category

Type of Sign	Languages	No of Signage	Percentage
1. Monolingual Signage	TH	40	56.3 %
	EN	13	18.3%
Total		53	74.6%
2. Bilingual Signage	TH-EN	15	21.1%
	TH-CN	2	2.8%
Total		17	23.9%
3. Trilingual Signage	TH-CH-EN	1	1.4%
Total		1	1.4%

Figure 1

Monolingual Signage



Figure 2

Bilingual Signage



Figure 3

Trilingual Signage



Visual prominence also supported the dominance of Thai as shown in Table 2. Among the 15 Thai–English signs, Thai was visually larger or more prominent in 10 signs while English was more prominent in 5 signs. The two Thai–Chinese signs showed equal visual balance between Thai and Chinese. The only trilingual sign was different from the overall pattern because Chinese was the largest element followed by English and then Thai. However, since this appeared in only one sign, it is better understood as a specific case of heritage branding rather than a general pattern in the community.

Table 2

Size in Bilingual Signs

Bilingual combination	Thai bigger	English bigger	Chinese bigger	Equal	Total
English–Thai	10	5	0	0	15
Thai–Chinese	0	0	0	2	2
Total	10	5	0	2	17

Language choice also varied across business types. As shown in Table 3, food and beverage businesses formed the largest group with 36 signs or 50.7% of all signs. Most signs in this group were monolingual Thai suggesting that these businesses mainly connected to Thai-speaking customers and local identity. However, English also appeared in some food and beverage signs especially in newer cafés, bakeries and tourist-oriented businesses.

Heritage and residential spaces formed the second largest group with 15 signs or 21.1%. This category was mainly represented by Thai signs, but it was also the only category where Thai–Chinese bilingual signs appeared. This suggests that Chinese is not widely used as an everyday commercial language. Instead, it appears mainly in relation to family history, Chinese heritage and the historical character of old buildings. Boutique hospitality signs were also multilingual reflecting their connection to tourism and heritage branding.

Table 3

Business Types and Sign Categories

Types of Business / Space (Rank)	Monolingual Thai	Monolingual English	Bilingual TH-EN	Bilingual TH-CN	Trilingual TH-CN-EN	Total	Percentage
1. Food & Beverage	25	4	7	0	0	36	50.7%
2. Heritage & Residential	9	0	4	2	0	15	21.1%
3. Traditional Retail & Services	6	4	0	0	0	10	14.1%
4. Institutional & Public Infrastructure	0	5	2	0	0	7	9.9%

Table 3 (Continue)

Types of Business / Space (Rank)	Monolingual Thai	Monolingual English	Bilingual TH-EN	Bilingual TH-CN	Trilingual TH-CN-EN	Total	Percentage
5. Boutique Hospitality	0	0	2	0	1	3	4.2%
Total	40	13	15	2	1	71	100%

Turning to the second research question, the interview data reveals three main factors shaping shop owners' language choices.

The interview data show that language choice was shaped by both practical and symbolic concerns. Three main themes emerged which are 1) preserving local, family, and heritage identity, 2) expanding accessibility and market reach, 3) creating a distinctive business image through language and visual design.

Preserving Local, Family, and Heritage Identity

For long-established businesses, signs were closely tied to family memory and the historical character of the community. One food business owner explained that the shop name came from an elder in the family. The same owner also linked the shop logo to the shape of the windows of the old shop. Similarly, a boutique hospitality business used Thai-style signage to match the old house to make visitors feel Thai atmosphere. These responses suggest that Thai and traditional visual design were used not only for identification but also to maintain family history, architectural memory, and local belonging.

Expanding Accessibility and Market Reach

English was used more selectively to reach tourists, wider markets, and online audiences. A jewelry-related business owner described this as an effort to make the brand “go inter,” adding that English was used together with Thai as a main language of the business to increase digital search-ability. Chinese was mentioned as useful for some tour groups, but it did not appear as a general commercial language in the signage data. Instead, it remained limited to specific visitor groups or heritage-related meanings.

Creating Brand Image through Language and Visual Design

Language choice was also part of branding, especially among newer food and beverage businesses, creative shops and boutique hospitality businesses. One owner explained that the shop used an unusual English spelling because it provided uniqueness. Other owners connected the shop name with the wider atmosphere of the business including architecture, lighting, decoration, logos, and product display. Some also used images instead of words

because those owners believed that drawings are a universal language. This shows that signs in the community worked as part of a broader visual identity not only as written language.

In summary, shop owners' language choices were shaped by both practical and symbolic purposes. Thai was associated with local communication, family memory, and heritage identity. English supported tourist accessibility, online visibility, and modern branding. Chinese appeared in relation to heritage or specific tourist groups. Thus, shop signs in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community served not only to identify businesses but also to express how local owners navigate between community identity and tourism development.

Discussion

The findings show that the linguistic landscape of the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community does not follow the same pattern found in highly internationalized tourist areas. In places such as Khaosan Road, English is highly visible because the area is strongly shaped by foreign tourism and commercial activity (Rungswang, 2023). In Chanthaboon, Thai remains dominant in both frequency and visual prominence. This suggests that tourism development does not automatically lead to English dominance. The linguistic landscape of a heritage community is also shaped by local history, domestic tourism, long-established family businesses and the desire to preserve a sense of place. In this respect, the findings are closer to studies of Bang Saen, Hat Yai, and Shaoxing where local or national languages remain central despite the presence of tourism and globalization (Low, 2022; Savski, 2021; Shen, 2022).

English in Chanthaboon plays a selective rather than dominant role. It appears in businesses that are connected with tourism, branding, hospitality, public information and digital visibility. Interview data show that some shop owners use English not only to communicate with foreign visitors but also to increase chances for online visibility and to create a modern or international image. This supports previous studies showing that English in tourist landscapes often carries both practical and symbolic meanings (Lu et al., 2020; Pathanasin, 2025). In Chanthaboon, English does not replace Thai. Instead, it operates as an additional resource used by particular businesses for specific commercial purposes.

Chinese has a different function. Although the community has a long history of Chinese cultural influence, Chinese rarely appears on shop signs. Its limited presence suggests that it is not mainly used for everyday communication with customers. Rather, Chinese functions as a symbolic marker of heritage, family history, and cultural memory. The finding supports the view that languages in public spaces do not always serve direct informational purposes. They may also work as semiotic resources that express identity, memory, and belonging (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

This pattern reflects the position of Chanthaboon as a living heritage community. It is open to tourism, but it has not been fully reshaped by international tourism in the same way as larger commercial destinations.

Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research

This study examined the linguistic landscape of the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community through 71 shop signs and interviews with seven shop owners. The findings show that Thai is the dominant language on shop signs both in number and visual prominence. English appears in signs connected with tourism, branding, hospitality, public information and online visibility. Chinese appears only twice and is used mainly as a marker of heritage and family history.

The study suggests that smaller heritage communities may not follow the same linguistic pattern as major tourist destinations. While English often becomes highly visible in strongly internationalized tourist areas, Chanthaboon remains anchored in Thai. This shows that language choice in public space is shaped not only by tourism but also by local history, ownership, community identity and the symbolic value of place.

Practically, the findings suggest that signage in heritage communities should balance accessibility with authenticity. English and other foreign languages can help visitors understand businesses and services especially in tourism-related areas. However, Thai and local visual styles remain important because they help preserve the cultural character of the community. This suggests that encouraging bilingual signage rather than replacing local Thai signs with English-dominant ones may better serve both visitors and the cultural character of the community.

The study has some limitations. It focused only on shop signs and shop owners' perspectives. It did not examine how tourists actually read, understand or respond to the signs.

Future research should examine tourist perspectives on signage in the Chanthaboon Riverfront Community such as how tourists interpret visual elements such as fonts, images, logos, and architecture. This would extend the present study by shifting the focus from the producers of signs to the readers of signs.

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