

# Multilingual Landscapes on Thailand's Borders<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The existence of ASEAN is one of several reasons that English and ASEAN members' national languages appear widely on signs in Thailand, especially in border cities. In fact, there has been an evolution in the use of languages, especially in public sign writing. For this reason, this research project examined the languages used on signs in certain cities bordering on Thailand. This article explores the following two issues: 1) language choice, and 2) writing patterns on signs in Thailand's neighboring cities, Tachilek in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar and Savannakhet in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The data consists of 800 public signs collected from the two cities. The study showed that there were three patterns of language choice on signs in both cities: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs. Four types of writing patterns - homophonic, mixed, polyphonic, and monophonic - were found. The national language is the first language that appears on signs, followed by foreign languages. Tachilek has more multilingual signs than Savannakhet because more languages are used there.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, multilingual signs, language choice, national language

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## **Introduction**

Language use on public signs in Thailand has been changing, primarily due to globalization, immigration, international trade, and the establishment of ASEAN. Huebner (2006) studied linguistic landscapes in Bangkok and found that most signs are written in Thai and combined with English and Chinese. Sirichareon (2016) studied linguistic landscapes in an educational setting and found out that there are other foreign languages such as Japanese, Korean, German and French written on signs at that university. There are several studies in Thailand showing foreign language choice and use on signs (Prapobratanakul, 2016; Sutthinaraphan, 2016; Thongtong, 2016) and the results show that English is the most prominent foreign language used on signs in Thailand. Bolton (2012: 32, cited in Prapobratanakul, 2016: 26) suggested that the increased use of English around the world could be seen as the instantiation of processes related to economic and cultural globalization. Foreign languages such as English, Chinese, Korean, and Russian appear on public signs, as well as those of neighboring countries, illustrating this phenomenon of multilingualism. According to Tejarajanya (2019), in the Mahachai area of Bangkok there are public signs both by government and private owners in the languages of migrant workers (Burmese, Lao and Khmer). Such a change in Thailand is prominent in urban settings, and can also be found in border cities, where at least two languages from both sides can be found on public signs. Siwina (2018) found Khmer language on public signs in two Surin hospitals and Seangyen (2015) found Lao language on public signs in Udon Thani. Both are border provinces. This study aims to examine the language situation via linguistic landscapes in Thailand's border areas, where communication and trading occur between neighboring countries. Languages used on public signs index and inform language situation as well as the growing of other languages in particular area (Cenoz and Gorter, 2008).

## Literature Review

Linguistic Landscape (henceforth LL) is a sub-discipline of sociolinguistics (Backhaus, 2007) that started with the study of language choice. Before the term, LL, was first introduced by Landry and Bourhis (1997), there were a number of studies about the written form on public signs (e.g., Rosenbaum et al., 1997 and Tulp, 1978 as cited in Edelman 2010). Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) defined LL in the following way:

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 LL has typically been studied using two perspectives – linguistics and society. The linguistic perspective means studying language phenomena such as language borrowing, language mixing, translation, language policy, and language use as well as language maintenance. Prapobratanakul (2016) studied hybridity or the mixing of Thai and English on shop signs in Bangkok. Monnier (1989, cited in Backhaus 2007:17) studied language use on signs and language policy in Quebec. Moreover, it should be noted that social perspective involves the identity, power, and culture conveyed via the linguistic landscapes. Moriarty (2012) studied language ideology in tourist spots in Ireland using linguistic landscape as a research tool. In the research project described here, LL is used as a tool to find more information concerning language choice on signs and how multilingualism works in the studied areas.

The languages' presence on signs identifies the importance of each language in a particular community. Counting the number of languages on signs is a way to find out which language is prominent and important in that area. Scollon and Scollon (2003) also proposed three text-analysis frameworks, one of which is a code preference system. This system is employed to analyze signs with more than one

language. According to Backhaus (2007), this framework explains how language choices on signs are related to the geographical area. The prominence and position of the language are the criteria. Only counting the number of languages or analyzing writing script position, however, cannot explain why those languages are chosen. Spolsky (2009: 33) stated that there are three conditions for selecting languages on signs. The first is the sign writers' linguistic proficiency. The second condition is achieving communicative goals; for this reason, it is the sign's presumed readers. In countries where English is not the official language, the sign writers may include English, which they see as a global language, to communicate with foreigners. The third condition is symbolic value. Sign writers may select the language because it is their own language or the language with which they want to be identified (Spolsky, 2009). There has been research that counted only the number of languages on signs. The researcher will use the script criteria for language classification and count the number. This quantitative research aims to show which languages are available and can be seen in public. Frequency of appearance will convey the importance of specific languages in an area.

In addition to the number and the prominence of languages, the way in which written forms on signs are arranged should be taken into account for analyzing the multilingual situation and language users. According to Coulmas (2009: 22), LL research must take issue with the questions of "who is able to read this sign" and "who reads it". LL research uses linguistic knowledge to analyze the language data to study the multilingual aspects of the area, such as the role of the national language in a multilingual society.

Qualitative analysis is the analysis of multilingual writing. Reh (2004) suggested that multilingual texts can communicate much to targeted groups in a community. Reh (2004) found that data from LL could be used in analyzing the patterns of multilingual writing based on the readers. If those who read a sign have knowledge of various languages, they will understand signs with information in any language, even signs are written in one language. If those who read the signs have

less language knowledge, the signs should be written in more languages in order to achieve communicative goals.

But if the tourists can read the local language, they will understand what the message is intended to convey. Consequently, according to Reh (2004), signs with more languages aim to communicate with people with different language abilities. If a sign has only one language, only some groups can read it. Moreover, the presentation of LL can reflect the level of multilingualism in a society.

Backhaus (2007) conducted a study of public signs in Tokyo with the objective of finding the differences in multilingual signs using script and writing style as the criteria. Backhaus (2007: 91) identified the analysis criteria as follows.

1. Homophonic is a direct translation or transliteration of all texts in every language that appears on the signs.
2. Mixed is the partial translation or transliteration of text.
3. Polyphonic consists of the messages in which each language does not have the same meaning.
4. Monophonic is a sign with only one written language.

The results of the study showed that different sign makers (from the government and private sectors) produce different signboards. In Tokyo, language use on government signs is less diverse than on those of private owners. This difference has caused a variety of LL in Tokyo.

Backhaus (2007) also suggested, however, that the writing style alone cannot be used to conclude whether a society is multilingual because there are other language factors involved, such as the communication purpose of the message, and the quantity, proportion, and function of each language text. For this reason, Backhaus (2007) divided mixed writing patterns into two subcategories. For example, Japanese version complete is a mixed sign containing the majority of details in the Japanese language. Foreign version complete is a mixed sign containing more details in a foreign language than in Japanese.

There are a limited number of LL studies in border areas. For example, Martínez (2014) analyzed Spanish speakers' attitudes towards signs in public health services organizations in Hidalgo County, Texas.

The study indicated that English is more important than Spanish. Muth (2014) explores the LL in the capital city of Trans-Styria, which is Tiraspol. Tiraspol is 20 kilometers from Ukraine and Moldova and, consequently, Muth concluded that it is in a border area. The results show that the Russian language is used in both monolingual and multilingual signs. Muth stated that while this city is in a country that has three official languages, the LL consists of only one language.

It can be seen that the study of LL in border areas has not yet been conducted in the multi-lingual analysis of the area, especially in the cities located across from Thailand. This research endeavors to fill these gaps.

### **Research Questions**

1. What languages can be found in LL of Tachilek (Thailand - Myanmar border) and Savannakhet (Thailand – Laos border)?
2. What writing patterns can be found in LL of Tachilek (Thailand - Myanmar border) and Savannakhet (Thailand – Laos border)?
3. What is the multilingual scenery like in Thailand's border areas?

### **Hypotheses**

1. The national languages of the countries, Thai language, and others could be found in LL.
2. The writing patterns found in LL include monophonic, mixed, homophonic and polyphonic.
3. The multilingual scenery in Thailand's border areas is multilingualism.

### **Data Collection**

Among the many possible research areas of borders, Savannakhet and Tachilek were selected because both have permanent border crossing points. The cities are not far from Thailand's border. Consequently, it is very convenient for all travelers to enter and exit each area, as well

as quite safe. During long holidays or festivals, around one million people travel to Tachilek via the Mae Sai permanent crossing point (Prachachartthurakit, 2019). Savannakhet also is a famous transit city for those going to Vietnam (Emerging Markets Consulting Co., Ltd., 2019). Moreover, the travelers are from various countries and use various languages. Both cities, whether on the Thai side or that of a neighboring country, are quite famous for their tourism and commercial routes. Savannakhet is the capital city of Savannakhet province, located in the central region of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. It is close to the Thai district city in Mukdahan province. The Mekong river is the boundary, and the second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge connects the two cities. In this area, most people use Lao to communicate (Royal Thai Consulate-General, Savannakhet, 2019). By contrast, Tachilek is a town in the Shan State of the Union of Myanmar, adjacent to Mae Sai district, Chiang Rai province. Most people use Burmese to communicate (Uttama et al., 2015).

In this research, the data consisted of 400 photos of signs from each city, for a total 800 signs. All photos were randomly taken using an iPhone8+ smartphone while walking along the streets in Tachilek and Savannakhet. The research sites consist of markets and main roads in those areas. Many varieties of signs were photographed, such as shop signs, advertisements, traffic signs, and building signs.

Data will be analyzed in three steps. The first step is to find the language choice pattern on signs, so that the number of writing scripts can be counted. Script in this research means alphabet or characters.

The second step is to find the writing pattern, so the data will be categorized based on written content, such as translation and transliteration. The third step is to analyze who the presumed reader of the sign is, so that the length of the translated text will be considered. For example, if the sign writer wants to communicate only with Lao readers, the writing in bilingual signs may be longer in Lao than other languages.

## Results

In order to analyze the language choice on signs, data were counted and divided into three patterns using writing scripts as the criteria. The script of each language is counted. A monolingual sign is a sign with only one language. A bilingual sign is a sign with two languages, while a multilingual sign is a sign with more than two languages.

Language and language choice on signs in Savannakhet and Tachilek are summarized in Table 1. In Savannakhet, signs are written in Lao, English (Eng), Chinese (Ch), and other languages. In Tachilek, signs are written in Burmese, English (Eng), Thai, Chinese (Ch) and other languages. There are 260 bilingual signs (65 percent) in Savannakhet and 251 signs (63 percent) written in the national language (Lao) with English. Figure 1 shows an example of a Lao-English billboard for drinks. The rest are Lao with other languages, such as Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and French, for a total of nine sign (2 percent). Figure 2 shows the bilingual Lao-French labels on official government signs.

**Table 1** Language choice on signs in survey areas

City	Language choice on signs		
	Monolingual signs	Bilingual signs	Multilingual signs
<b>Savannakhet</b>	<b>114 (29%)</b>	<b>260 (65%)</b>	<b>26 (6%)</b>
400 items	Lao 98 (25%)	Lao-Eng 251 (63%)	Lao-Ch-Eng 16 (4%)
	Eng 16 (4%)	Others 9 (2%)	Others 10 (2%)
<b>Tachilek</b>	<b>156 (39%)</b>	<b>195 (49%)</b>	<b>49 (12%)</b>
400 items	Burmese 150 (38%)	Burmese-Eng 159 (40%)	Burmese-Thai-Eng 25 (6%)
	Others 6 (1%)	Burmese-Thai 23 (6%)	Burmese-Ch-Thai-Eng 14 (4%)
		Others 13 (3%)	Others 10 (2%)

The second most prevalent is a monolingual sign. There are 98 signs (25 percent) in Lao and 16 signs (4 percent) in English, such as the signs shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4. The multilingual signs in Savannakhet consist of only 26 signs (6 percent). For example, Figure 5 shows a multilingual sign for an insurance company.





Figure 1 Bilingual sign (Lao - English)



Figure 2 Bilingual sign (Lao - French)

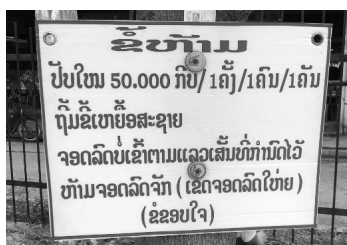


Figure 3 Monolingual sign (Lao)



Figure 4 Monolingual sign (English)



Figure 5 Multilingual (Lao - English - Vietnamese - Chinese)

By contrast, in Tachilek, the study found 195 (49 percent) bilingual signs. Most (159 signs, or 40 percent) are bilingual signs in Burmese-English, such as in Figure 6, which shows Burmese language text on a photocopy shop sign. The first line is the shop's name, "Lucky," which is an English transliteration using Burmese characters. The following text means "copy" to indicate that it is a photocopy shop. Aside from English, there are 23 items (6 percent) in Burmese-Thai. Figure 7 shows a sign with a message indicating the location of the

photocopying shop. Moreover, the study found 156 (39 percent) of signs in Tachilek are monolingual. Burmese is the most common language with 150 items (38 percent). In Figure 8, the text is mainly about electrical installation services, while the rest is in other languages, such as Thai and English. Figure 9 has Thai written as “Som Tam,” a spicy papaya salad. In the study, there are 49 (12 percent) multilingual signs in Tachilek.



Figure 6 Bilingual sign (Burmese - English)



Figure 7 Bilingual sign (Burmese - Thai)



Figure 8 Monolingual sign (Burmese)



Figure 9 Monolingual sign (Thai)



Figure 10 Multilingual sign (Burmese - English - Thai - Chinese)

Table 1, language use on signs, shows that the LL scenery in Thailand's border cities is multilingual. The total number of bilingual and multilingual signs is higher than that of monolingual signs. They are written in several languages and the messages on most signs indicate that their presumed readers are foreigners. According to Spolsky (2009), languages are chosen because of the linguistic skill of the sign writers and sign readers. Thus, it might be assumed that sign writers and sign readers are able to understand those languages. However, the number of languages from written scripts is not sufficient to reach a conclusion. For this reason, the writing patterns of signs were analyzed.

In this research, the writing pattern was analyzed in two steps. The first step was to find the way in which messages in every language appear on signs, such as translation and transliteration. The researcher used the Backhaus analysis framework (Backhaus, 2007) to analyze all 800 signs. There are four writing patterns, namely monophonic, homophonic, mixed and polyphonic (Table 2). The two areas have a different number of writing patterns based on Backhaus's criteria.

**Table 2** Writing pattern on public signs

City	Writing Pattern			
	Monophonic	Homophonic	Mixed	Polyphonic
Savannakhet	114 (29 %)	83 (20%)	187 (47%)	16 (4%)
Tachilek	156 (39 %)	73 (18 %)	149 (37%)	22 (6%)

In Savannakhet, the most common form is mixed writing, in which the text is presented in more than one language, and the content of the text is translated or transliterated in some parts of the text. There are 187 (47 percent) items. For example, Laochaleun Bar has Lao transliteration, as shown in Figure 11. However, the words "food" and "music" are not translated or transliterated into Lao. Therefore, the sign meets the criteria for the mixed writing style. Monophonic writing was found to be the second most frequent at 114 (29 percent) items. The text is only in Lao, such as in Figure 3, and English is another language

found on monolingual signs, as in Figure 4. The third is the homophonic writing style with 83 (20 percent) items. In this style, all of the text on a signboard is translated or transliterated into other languages. Most of the signs indicate traffic rules or tell the name of a place. The purpose is to provide information. The use of the homophonic writing style is to communicate to an audience of the languages in the sign. The least number is polyphonic, in which the text of each language on the sign does not have the same meaning, because they are not translated or transliterated. Figure 1 is a billboard advertising beer, though the message in both languages is not related. These types of banners are mostly for product advertisements. Also, foreign languages, such as English or Korean, are used to make a message more interesting or to show the product's identity, but it is not the translation of Lao. As Sutthinaraphan (2016) indicated, English appeared mostly in advertisements because they have a sense of luxury, are more interesting and attractive, and create more impact. Moreover, according to Cenoz and Gorter (2008: 269), this finding confirms that English is also the main language of popular culture and globalization as can be seen in advertising.

In Tachilek, the study found the monophonic form is the most common, found on 156 signs (39 percent). Figure 8 is an example of monophonic writing. Mixed writing is the second most common. In Figure 12, the Burmese words mean, "Smoking is prohibited" and "Thanks for not smoking in public areas." In English, there is only "Thanks for not smoking," partially translated.

The third most common writing composition found on signs is homophonic. In Figure 14, "Cherry Street" is translated directly into the word "street" and transliterated as "Cherry." The polyphonic form is found the least.



Figure 11 Mixed sign in Savannakhet



Figure 12 Mixed sign in Tachilek



Figure 13 Homophonic sign in Savannakhet



Figure 14 Homophonic sign in Tachilek



Figure 15 Mixed sign in Tachilek



Figure 16 Mixed sign in Savannakhet

The second step of writing pattern analysis is to find out which languages are selected to communicate complete content on signs in a mixed pattern. The mixed writing style is divided into two groups: 1) national language (Lao and Burmese) version complete and 2) foreign language version complete. For example, if there are three languages on one sign, but the Lao language conveys the most detail in the message, it is called Lao Version Complete. On the other hand, if a foreign language conveys the majority of detail, it is called Foreign Version Complete.

**Table 3** Mixed writing pattern category

City	Mixed Signs		
Savannakhet (187 items)	Lao version complete	158	84 %
	Foreign version complete	29	16 %
Tachilek (149 items)	Burmese version complete	82	55 %
	Foreign version complete	67	45 %

Mixed signs in Tachilek are different from those in Savannakhet in terms of the length of the description, translation, or transliteration in writing. Tachilek has more signs written in Burmese and foreign languages as a complete text than Savannakhet. Figure 15 is a sign in Tachilek in three languages where the main text in a foreign language is complete. The first line of Burmese means “San Shawn 2 Bakery,” which is the shop’s name, while the Chinese text is “Fresh wholesale cake shop,” which tells us that it sells cake varieties. The Thai text is the store name and transliterates the word, “Bakery.” For this reason, the Chinese text has more details about the shop than the Burmese text and is considered to be the main text that completes the foreign language context. The Burmese and Thai texts do not give detailed information about the kind of bakery shop, but only identify what it sells.

An example of a mixed writing style with the main idea message written in Lao is Figure 16, which shows a three-language sign. The first line is Chinese, meaning Savan Hostel. The fourth line is Lao,

pronounced “Savan Café.” The Lao text in the fifth line means coffee promotion, “Buy 3 get 1 free” (on the left), and promotion coffee menu “8 stamps, get 1 free coffee” (on the right). The seventh line means live music on the rooftop with beer at 10,000 kip (Lao currency). The eighth line indicates, “One dish at 22,000 kip.” The main content of the sign is in Lao and is not translated into any foreign language.

## Discussion

The analysis of language choice and writing patterns leads to an overview of the LL in two border cities. The national language of both places is the primary language found on various public signs because every sign is written in the national language. Also, if a sign has more than one language, the national language will be placed in a prominent position. A large or prominent font size shows the importance of the national language, according to the code preference system proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2003). For bilingual or multilingual signs, one language will be selected to stand out from the others. The reason is to show the importance of that language in the context as well as the dominance of the national language. Also, it shows that both areas want to convey ethnic identity (Spolsky, 2009) and express language power and status (Gorter and Cenoz, 2007). For example, government signs use most national languages in order to show the power of the government. Figure 17 and 18 show government signs which place national language above other languages.



**Figure 17** Government sign in Savannakhet



**Figure 18** Government sign in Tachilek



English is the most common foreign language on signs in both cities because English is used to communicate internationally and is the language of the ASEAN Community. Therefore, border areas have signs that foreigners can understand in order to achieve communication goals. Spolsky (2009) proposed that choosing the language for a sign is important when considering sign readers' language skills. Like other linguistic landscape studies (e.g. Backhaus, 2007; Bolton, 2012; Cenoz and Gorter, 2008), this research shows that English plays the role of international language in this era of globalization.

Surprisingly, there is no presence of Thai in Savannakhet, as there is in Tachilek. Thus, the sign writers in Savannakhet focus on communicating in international languages to a large group of people in general. Their target group is larger in number than the number of Thai people. However, the sign writers in Tachilek aim to communicate with both English-speaking and Thai people. This is the difference between language choices in these two areas. According to Global Newlight of Myanmar (2018), Thai people are the majority of tourists crossing into Myanmar via Tachilek, and tourists who come from other countries also travel through the Mae Sai border check point to Myanmar. On the other hand, the majority of tourists going to Savannakhet are on their way to Vietnam (Emerging Markets Consulting Co., Ltd., 2019). As a result, the language on signs in Tachilek is more diverse than in Savannakhet.

The analysis of the writing patterns of bilingual and multilingual signs shows that these two regions have different multilingual landscapes. Signs with mixed writing styles have different formats, as shown in Table 3. According to Backhaus (2007: 93), the difference varies in terms of the amount of translated or transliterated information. In Savannakhet, there are more Lao version complete signs than foreign language versions. For this reason, people who understand Lao are more likely to understand all the text on the signboards than those who do not use Lao. According to Spolsky (2009), the conditions for selecting the language on signs are the sign readers' and sign writers' language skills and symbolic value. Most signs are in Lao, because the Lao sign writers are more concerned about Lao users than foreigners. Savannakhet is a



city that many travelers pass through on their way to Vietnam, so it is not the main destination for tourists. The majority of the presumed readers are Lao; as a result, Lao is the most prominent on public signs. Apart from linguistic skills, Lao is chosen because of identity presentation. The sign writers wish to be identified with their national language rather than an ASEAN community language or the language of the neighboring country; thus the number of Lao version complete signs is quite high, at 158 items (84 percent).

In Tachilek there is less of a difference between the Burmese version complete signs and foreign language version complete signs than in Savannakhet. Tachilek emphasizes foreign languages as much as the national language, and uses both English – the ASEAN community language and Thai – the language of the neighboring country, in most signs. The reason behind this could be assumed from the conditions in the sign-writing process. As Spolsky (2009) have suggested, it is essential to take into account the sign readers and the goal of communication. For this reason, both languages are selected to communicate almost equally, and Tachilek sign writers choose to be identified with the multilingual writing style.

From this analysis, it appears that the LL in Tachilek is more multilingual than in Savannakhet. The reason for this could be that Savannakhet shows identity presentation via language choice. By contrast, in Tachilek there appears to be more concern with communication goals.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that there are typically three patterns of language choice on signs in border areas of Thailand: monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual. The difference in language choice between the areas is the extent to which the Thai language is used. While Thai does not appear on the signs in Savannakhet, it is used widely on signs in Tachilek. There are four types of writing patterns – homophonic, mixed, polyphonic, and monophonic. In Savannakhet it appears that the language on signs is chosen for purposes of identity presentation since the Lao version complete main idea in mixed signs appears more frequently than the

foreign language version complete. On the other hand, in Tachilek the language on signs is chosen for both identity presentation and communicative purposes. There is no significant difference between the number of complete Burmese version signs and foreign language complete version signs. As a result, language choice and writing composition contribute to the differences in the multilingual scenery of Thailand's border areas.

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