Language, Identity, and Commerce: A Comparative Linguistic Landscape Analysis of Advertisement Signage in the Thailand-Malaysia Borderland

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative linguistic landscape (LL) analysis of advertisement signage in the Thailand-Malaysia border region, focusing on the visibility of languages, script usage, and ideological implications in public space. Grounded in Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) theory of language use and Shohamy's (2006) concept of LL as an ideological mechanism, the study examines 585 signs collected from eight towns across the border area. Findings reveal distinct national patterns: in Thailand, signage is predominantly monolingual, reflecting a centralized language policy that prioritizes Thai as a symbol of national identity. In contrast, Malaysia's signage displays rich multilingualism—including Malay in both Rumi and Jawi scripts, English, Chinese, and Tamil—particularly in Kelantan where Jawi represents Islamic cultural identity. These differences underscore how signage serves not only commercial functions but also reflects sociopolitical ideologies, religious identities, and language policies. The study highlights the role of public signage as a visual arena where commerce, culture, and policy intersect in complex borderland contexts.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, Advertisement signage, Multilingualism, Language policy, Border studies

Introduction

The linguistic landscape (LL) refers to the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signage within a particular geographic area (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). As a growing field within sociolinguistics, LL research investigates how the display of language in public spaces reflects sociopolitical ideologies, constructs identities, and reinforces power dynamics. Signs are not neutral; they are social texts shaped by political authority, cultural memory, and commercial interest. Borderland regions, in particular, offer a compelling context for LL studies. These areas represent points of intersection between different languages, ethnicities, and state ideologies. The Thailand-Malaysia borderland is one such space where multiple identities converge and interact. Its unique

position as a cultural and commercial corridor makes it especially relevant for examining how language choice on signage reflects broader socio-political negotiations.

In this study, we focus on the LL of advertisement signage in eight towns—four on each side of the border. These towns were selected not only for their geographical proximity to international border checkpoints but also for their active commercial environments and ethnolinguistic diversity. The visual language of signs in these areas offers insights into how local communities engage with issues of identity, commerce, and state authority.

Advertisement signage plays a dual role in this linguistic landscape: it conveys practical business information while also serving as a symbol of identity, ideology, and belonging. The choice of language(s), scripts, and typographic design can signal inclusivity or exclusion, religious affiliation, national loyalty, or transnational aspiration. In culturally contested or multilingual zones, such as border towns, these signs become microcosms of larger societal patterns, capturing the subtle tensions and harmonies between national policies and local practices.

This paper argues that the analysis of advertisement signage in the Thailand–Malaysia borderland does not merely reveal patterns of multilingualism or monolingualism—it uncovers how commerce, culture, and policy intersect visually in public space. Understanding these dynamics can contribute to broader discussions about language planning, cultural representation, and regional integration in Southeast Asia.

Significance of the study

The study contributes to an evolving body of LL research by emphasizing the socio-commercial role of signage in border towns, particularly in Southeast Asia. While much LL scholarship has focused on metropolitan areas or national capitals, relatively little has examined how borderland signage reveals everyday negotiations of language and identity. In these multilingual zones, signage is not merely functional but serves as an arena where state ideologies, cultural identities, and market logics intersect.

The findings have several implications: 1) they illustrate how state language policies are materialized in everyday communication; 2) they highlight the dynamic relationship between language visibility and identity in commercial settings; and 3) they offer insights into the impact of religious and cultural diversity on public language practices. This is particularly relevant in the Southeast Asian context, where linguistic pluralism is both a cultural asset and a political challenge.

Research questions and objectives

This study seeks to explore the linguistic landscape (LL) of advertisement signage in the Thailand-Malaysia borderland by addressing the following research questions:

1) What are the dominant languages and scripts used in commercial advertisement signage in border towns along the Thailand-Malaysia frontier?

2) How do sociocultural, economic, and religious factors shape language and script choices in signage?

3) In what ways do national and regional language policies influence the linguistic landscape of these towns?

4) How does the use of signage differ between Thai and Malaysian border towns in representing identity and commerce?

These research questions are designed to fulfil the broader research objectives, which are as follows:

1) To identify the dominant languages and scripts used in commercial signage across the selected border towns.

2) To analyze how sociocultural, economic, and religious contexts influence language selection and script representation.

3) To assess the extent to which national and regional language policies shape public signage and linguistic visibility.

4) To compare the linguistic and visual strategies used in Thai and Malaysian signage to reinforce or negotiate cultural and national identities.

Through these questions and objectives, the study aims to uncover the intricate relationship between language, identity, and commerce in one of Southeast Asia's most linguistically dynamic regions.

Theoretical framework

This study draws primarily on the foundational works of Spolsky and Cooper (1991), who propose that language use in public signage is guided by three conditions: 1) writers want to be read, 2) writers want to be recognized by readers as members of a particular group, and 3) writers want to convey messages consistent with their language beliefs or government policy. Shohamy (2006) extends this view by emphasizing the ideological function of LL, suggesting that language visibility is a tool for shaping social reality.

Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) introduce the concept of top-down and bottom-up signage, distinguishing between signs issued by authorities (e.g., government, education institutions) and those created by private entities (e.g., shop owners, advertisers). In borderland contexts, these distinctions can blur, especially where informal signage proliferates.

Landry and Bourhis (1997) conceptualize LL as a marker of ethnolinguistic vitality, where the presence or absence of a language in signage reflects its sociopolitical strength or marginalization. This is particularly salient in the Thai-Malay borderlands, where ethnic Malays, Chinese, and Thais coexist and where Islamic, Buddhist, and secular ideologies overlap.

The study also engages with recent scholarship on typographic ideology (Leeman & Modan, 2010; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010), exploring how font styles, script preferences, and design choices communicate implicit social meanings. Typography becomes a semiotic resource through which cultural values, authority, and modernity are expressed or contested.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyze the linguistic landscape of advertisement signage in border towns. A total of 585 advertisement signs were collected from eight strategically selected towns located within a 50-kilometre radius of major Thailand-Malaysia border checkpoints.

Table 1 Study locations included.

Country	State/Province	Town/City
Thailand	Yala	Betong
	Narathiwat	Weang
	Narathiwat	Sungai Kolok
	Narathiwat	Tak Bai
Malaysia	Perak	Gerik
	Kelantan	Tumpat
	Kelantan	Tanah Merah
	Kelantan	Rantau Panjang

Data collection procedures

Field data were gathered using systematic photographic documentation. Researchers visited each town and photographed all publicly visible advertisement signs located on streets, in marketplaces, near border checkpoints, and within commercial areas. Each image was geo-tagged and coded for analytical consistency.

Data classification criteria

Signs were classified based on:

1) Language composition: monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual.

2) Script type: Thai, Rumi (Malay in Roman script), Jawi (Malay in Arabic script), English, Chinese characters, Tamil, and Arabic.

3) Sign function and location: categorized into commercial zones, tourism areas, religious vicinities, or transportation hubs.

4) Qualitative visual aspects: including typographic features, script hierarchy (i.e., which language/script appeared most prominently), and cultural or religious elements (e.g., use of Islamic or Buddhist motifs).

Analytical approach

1) Quantitative analysis focused on frequency distributions of language combinations, script use, and the ratio of monolingual vs multilingual signage across different towns.

2) Qualitative analysis interpreted the visual and semiotic dimensions of signage to understand ideological implications, identity representation, and policy influences. The analysis was guided by Shohamy's (2006) framework on linguistic landscapes as ideological tools and Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) theory of language visibility and use.

This methodology ensured a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic and symbolic significance of public signage in a sociocultural complex border context.

Findings and comparative analysis

The comparative analysis of linguistic landscape (LL) signage in the Thailand–Malaysia border towns reveals striking ideological and practical differences in language visibility, script preference, and sociocultural representation. These differences align closely with each country's language policy, cultural dynamics, and demographic composition.

This study was conducted in eight border towns across Thailand and Malaysia. Each location was selected based on its geographical proximity to official checkpoints, cultural relevance, economic activities, and potential for language contact. A total of 585 advertisement signs were collected and analyzed.

The distribution of signage across these areas is detailed in the table below.

Table 2 Distribution of collected signs.

Country	State/ Province	Town / District	Number of Signs	Key Characteristics and Rationale
Thailand	Yala	Betong	68	A major southern Thai town attracting Malaysian tourists. Signage includes Thai–English and Thai–Chinese combinations in hotels, spas, and local businesses. Minimal presence of Malay.
	Narathiwat	Weang	65	Predominantly monolingual Thai signage. Low commercial diversity. Minimal multilingual visibility despite being a border district.
	Narathiwat	Sungai Kolok	74	High cross-border commerce. Bilingual signs with Thai–Malay (Rumi) common in markets and border shops. Religious influence evident in Jawi use.
	Narathiwat	Tak Bai	43	Culturally rich Islamic town. Most signage in Thai. Small number of Jawi and English signs, mostly for religious or tourism purposes.

Country	State/ Province	Town / District	Number of Signs	Key Characteristics and Rationale
Malaysia	Perak	Gerik	98	Trade town linked to southern Thai routes. Signage typically bilingual (Malay–Chinese, Malay–English). Jawi and Tamil are present but limited.
	Kelantan	Tumpat	87	Strong Islamic identity. Jawi is prominently used alongside Rumi and English, particularly in food, school, and religious signage.
	Kelantan	Tanah Merah	61	Diverse signage including up to four languages. Strong representation of Jawi, Rumi, English, and Chinese in public and commercial domains.
	Kelantan	Rantau Panjang	89	The most linguistically diverse town in the study. High multilingual signage density. Signage often includes Thai, Jawi, English, and Chinese. Local dialect (Kelantan Malay) also present.
	Total		**585**	

Thailand

Across the four Thai towns studied—Betong, Sungai Kolok, Weang, and Tak Bai—the signage landscape is overwhelmingly monolingual, dominated by the Thai language in Thai script. Even in provinces like Narathiwat and Yala, where there is a significant Malay-Muslim population, Malay language visibility (either in Rumi or Jawi scripts) remains minimal.

In Betong, although a tourist destination, most signage is in Thai. Some bilingual signs include Thai-English or Thai-Chinese, primarily used in hotels, spas, and cafes to accommodate tourists from Malaysia and China. However, the use of Malay is virtually absent, indicating limited acknowledgment of ethnic Malays despite their presence.

Sungai Kolok, a key commercial gateway to Malaysia, displays more bilingual signage than other towns. Notably, Thai-Malay (Rumi) signs appear in trade zones and border markets, reflecting cross-border interactions. However, this is still marginal compared to the dominant Thai monolingual signage.

In Weang and Tak Bai, signage remains predominantly Thai, with few exceptions. Bilingual signs in Thai-English are usually related to tourism or Islamic institutions, and Jawi script appears sporadically on mosque signage or halal shops, more symbolic than functional.

This trend reflects Thailand's centralized language policy, which emphasizes Thai as the sole official language. Typography often conforms to formal, standardized fonts approved for official use, further reinforcing the image of state control and cultural homogeneity.

Malaysia

By contrast, Malaysian towns—Gerik, Tumpat, Tanah Merah, and Rantau Panjang—display a high degree of multilingualism in public signage. This includes Malay in both Rumi and Jawi scripts, English, Chinese, and occasionally Tamil, especially in urban markets, government buildings, and religious institutions.

In Tumpat, a town with a strong Malay-Muslim identity, bilingual and trilingual signage using Malay (Rumi) – Malay (Jawi) – English is common. The promotion of Jawi script is aligned with Kelantan's Islamic governance, and signage in mosques, schools, and even food stalls reflect this religious-cultural emphasis.

Tanah Merah features diverse signage that includes Chinese characters in business districts, indicating the presence and influence of the local Chinese community. Here, four-language signage (Malay Rumi + Jawi + English + Chinese) can be found, particularly in pharmacies and cross-cultural commercial areas.

Rantau Panjang, being a vibrant trade town near the border, exhibits the highest multilingual density among the study locations. Signs frequently incorporate Malay (Jawi), English, Chinese, and occasionally Thai, catering to both locals and Thai Muslim shoppers. Some signs even employ Kelantanese Malay dialect, adding another layer of linguistic identity.

In Gerik, while the use of Jawi is less dominant, bilingual signage in Malay (Rumi)–Chinese or Malay–English is widespread, reflecting the town's commercial diversity and inclusive language practices.

Malaysia's signage reflects a policy of linguistic inclusivity, supporting national unity while embracing ethnic and religious diversity. The aesthetic variation in typography—ranging from formal Arabic calligraphy in Jawi to colorful Chinese fonts—visually represents Malaysia's multicultural fabric and state-supported pluralism.

Table 3 Summary linguistic landscape trends by location.

Location	Dominant Script(s)	Notable Linguistic Trends
Betong (TH)	Thai	Thai-English/Chinese signage in tourist zones; Malay absent
Sungai Kolok (TH)	Thai	Thai-Malay (Rumi) signage in trade zones; English used in hotels
Tumpat (MY)	Malay (Jawi & Rumi)	Strong Islamic identity; Jawi in religious and food signage
Rantau Panjang (MY)	Jawi, English, Chinese	High multilingual density; includes Thai and local dialects
Tanah Merah (MY)	Malay, Chinese, English	Four-language signage; ethnic and commercial inclusivity
Gerik (MY)	Malay, English, Chinese	Market-focused bilingualism; reflects inclusive economic strategy

In conclusion, Thailand's signage landscape supports linguistic uniformity, reflecting state-centered identity policies. Malaysia, on the other hand, uses signage as a platform for negotiation and representation, embracing linguistic diversity as part of its national and regional identity. These LL practices are not just about communication—they reveal underlying ideological structures, identity politics, and socio-economic strategies at play in the Thailand-Malaysia borderland.

Conclusion and recommendations

This comparative linguistic landscape (LL) study highlights the dual function of advertisement signage as both a practical communicative tool and a socio-political artifact. In Thailand, the dominance of monolingual Thai signage reveals a deliberate state strategy to reinforce centralized nationalism, linguistic homogeneity, and the unification of national identity. The restrictive use of other languages, even in ethnically diverse southern provinces, reflects how language visibility is tightly controlled to serve nation-building efforts and suppress minority language representation.

Conversely, in Malaysia, the presence of multilingual signage, especially in border states like Kelantan and Perak, represents a more inclusive and negotiated linguistic space. The co-existence of Malay (Rumi and Jawi), English, Chinese, and Tamil scripts in public signage reflects Malaysia's multicultural policies and the reality of a linguistically diverse society. In these contexts, signage becomes not only a means of commercial communication but also a symbolic representation of cultural plurality, religious affiliation, and historical coexistence.

Looking ahead, future research could explore several underexamined dimensions of the linguistic landscape in border regions. *First,* studies could focus on digital and LED-based signage, which is increasingly replacing traditional printed forms and may feature different patterns of language use, including animations, code-switching, and interactive elements. *Second,* investigating the linguistic landscape of religious and educational institutions could offer deeper insights into how sacred and pedagogical spaces reinforce or resist state language ideologies. *Third,* audience reception studies—examining how locals, cross-border travelers, and tourists interpret and respond to multilingual signage—could uncover the lived experiences and practical implications of language visibility. *Finally,* comparative analyses with other ASEAN border zones (e.g., Thailand-Myanmar, Malaysia-Indonesia, or Vietnam-Laos) could reveal regionally specific patterns and offer broader theoretical generalizations about linguistic landscapes in Southeast Asia.

Altogether, such extensions would significantly enhance our understanding of how language use in public signage not only reflects but actively shapes the cultural, economic, and political dynamics of complex geopolitical border zones.

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