Investigating public signage in the border area of Nong Khai: Multilingualism at a crossroads

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Abstract

Nong Khai, a border town between Thailand and Laos and a major land crossing between the two nations, has increasingly experienced the changes driven by ongoing economic development. With the introduction of Asean Economics Community (AEC) where the border crossing is friendlier and more welcoming, the once laid-back province has witnessed the economic boom, the rising trades as well as the influx of visitors on both sides of the border. Inevitably, to accommodate the changing economic and hybridised demographic landscape of the area, the language on display in the province, especially around the border area, has been affected. As linguistic landscape is arguably determined by societal demands and needs, the changing linguistic landscape of Nong Khai calls for an in-depth investigation. This research therefore aims to study the public signage in the border area of Nong Khai in order to 1) identify the languages appearing on those signs and their functions and 2) language order on the signs. The data for this study came from a field survey to the First Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, Tha Sadet Market (Indochina Market), official and non-official establishments surrounding the border post where 247 signs were collected and analysed. Findings suggest that at least 5 languages can be

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spotted on the public signs in the border areas and Tha Sadet market, the extent of which varies. English is the most preferred language on the signs in all the areas investigated.

Keywords: *Nong Khai, linguistic landscape, border, public signs*

Introduction

The visibility of language can definitely reflect the nature of a place. In a cosmopolitan city, for example, one may expect to see several languages on display in front of shops or street signs. Having bi-lingual or in some cases, multilingual signs can serve commercial, tourist or cultural interests. As Landry and Bourhis (1997) put it, public signs can express different communities' economic, political, and cultural capitals directly. Therefore, it is to no surprise that the adoption of bi and multilingual signs has become more common in the era of globalization in which political borders are more open and the influx of domestic and foreign migrants is no longer a novel phenomenon. Those signs are intended to accommodate the fast- changing demographics driven by immigration, tourism and business demand.

Given the dominating role that English is playing in our globalized society, we expect to see it as part of the modern linguistic landscape (henceforth LL) of most, if not all, corner of the world. It would be very rare to visit a town and not spot public signs with English on them despite the fact that English may not officially hold any status in the country. In Huebner's study of Bangkok's LL (2006), for instance, the visibility, variety and pervasiveness of English in 15 districts of the city was reported. Be reminded that English in Thailand has no official status and one of the former prime ministers who proposed the recognition of English as a second language was backfired with harsh criticisms. Another study conducted by Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Trumper-Hecht (2008) showcases the LL of Israeli cities. As the findings demonstrate, English was used alongside the other two existing languages: Jewish and Arabic. It also appeared that while the two languages carried political and historical implications, English was a neutral medium, serving as a *de facto* lingua franca for non-Israeli residents. In another study, Nikolaou (2016) investigated the LL of Athens, presuming that English would not be that visible in the non-tourist areas since Greece is a monolingual country. The results suggested otherwise; English appeared as part of written multilingualism even though it was included for the aesthetic purposes.

With the ASEAN Economic Community coming into effect in 2015, the status of English is made more secure as it was selected to be the working language of the 10 member nations. The inclusion of English into the landscape helps reinforce its privilege, extend its presence beyond major cities and inevitably contribute to the written bilingualism in Thailand. We do believe however, that while major cities in Thailand such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai would have clear visibility of bilingual signs of English and Thai, remote provinces such as border areas would pose more linguistic nuisances as they are also influenced by the languages of their neighbouring countries. Bordered by Laos and Cambodia to the east, Myanmar to the west and north and Malaysia to the south, Thailand is not merely exposed to English but also to Burmese, Malay, Cambodian and Lao. Presumably, the border provinces should abundantly illustrate the diverse LL influenced by the countries to which they are adjacent. Public signs in Sadao District in Songkla, therefore, are probably multilingual, with Thai, English and Malay scripts.

In this study, we explore the LL of a border province in the Northeast of Thailand, Nong Khai (henceforth NK). It is situated by the Mekong River that separates it from the capital city of Laos, Vientiane (henceforth VT). Regarded as the gateway to ASEAN, the province houses the first Thai-Lao friendship bridge that connects Thailand to Laos and further to Vietnam. Due to its strategic geographical setting, NK is home to different group of people, both local and foreign. Our initial hypothesis is that NK's LL will capture its multiracial and multilingual demographics. It would also be interesting to compare the linguistic visibility at NK's border post with VT's one. Therefore, our study aims to respond to the following research questions:

1. *What languages appear on the signs in the border areas and Tha Sadet market of NK?*
2. *What is the language order of the signs in the border areas and Tha Sadet market of NK?*

Literature Review

There is a large pool of research on LL, its definition and its construction of a city characteristic. In this paper, we have surveyed some of the studies that are relevant to our focus. The reason why we chose to study the LL of NK is because we believed that the choices of language to be appearing on the public signs were consciously decided by those involved in the

process of sign making. Marten, Van Mensel and Gorter (2012) argue that LL studies not only the signs but also the sign makers who can make a decision as in how signs should be created, where they should be placed and who they are meant to serve. It is also posited that the hierarchies and patterns of the languages appearing on the signs are a result of manipulation at the policy level. Ivkovic and Lotherington (2009) propose the idea that cities are to be read as written texts and can therefore be treated as something that marks the city's identity and captures power relations. The two studies lead to the underlying concept of our investigation of NK's LL; signs are not just simple written texts. Instead, they help form the city's identity and reflect certain ideologies, be it linguistic, political or cultural, of the sign makers.

Modern research into area-specific LL is abundant. In this paper, we review a handful of work that was recently published and geographically diverse to emphasize the fact that LL has been done in a global scale. In Eastern Europe, for example, Gradečak-Erdelji**ć** and Zlomisli**ć** (2014) studied the LL situation in the city of Osijek, Croatia and reported the pervasive Americanization shown through its public signs. They argued that the Americanization was so strong that it was competing with the Croatian language and culture. A study by Budarina (2017) reported the multilingual LL of Berlin where monolingual German signs were most visible, followed by bilingual ones with German-English. It was argued that while the LL of Berlin's private sector was shaped by its multiracial residents, hence multilingual signs (Turkish, Ukrainian and Greek among others), the public signs were controlled by the authorities, hence German at the top of linguistic hierarchy. In Oromia, Ethiopia, Fekede and Gemechu (2015) collected 900 signs from the three towns to analyse the ethnolinguistic vitality and found that Amharic and English were more visible than Afan Oromo, the regional government's working language. The findings reinforce the language and power ideology in which the policy from the central government is prioritized over the reality of the people and the geographical settings.

Studies on the LL of Thailand have also been continuously growing. Huebner (2006)'s study of the LL of Bangkok compared the government sector signs with the private sector signs, revealing a high degree of codemixing of Thai-English and to a lesser extent, Chinese. In Backhaus's book (2007), the author also illustrated Bangkok's Thai-English codemixing on signs. Moving north, Yanhong and Rungrung (2013) studied the LL functions in Chiang Mai's tourist attraction areas. They analysed the types of code-mixing on signs and pinpointed the

prominence of English as a world language. Five types of Thai-English codemixing were also categorised. The recent study by Prasert and Jimarkon Zilli (2019) takes us to the city of Pattaya, approximately 200 km east of Bangkok, that receives a high number of tourists from around the world. Seven coding schemes were created based on the types of business and findings were reported based on the number of languages visually displayed on signs. While one may be able to anticipate the usual codemixing of English-Thai signs, one may find it surprising to learn that monolingual signs at the infamous walking street of Pattaya were dominated by English succeeded by Arabic, Thai and Russian. Apparently, the language choice was business-oriented in nature.

The linguistic landscape of border areas is another crucial point of investigation as the choice of language on public signs can represent different political and ethnolinguistic realities. According to Landry and Bourhis (1997, as cited in Kimura, 2017), language can serve two basic functions: informational and symbolic. While the former concerns LL as a marker of geographical territory, the latter has an impact on the positive social identity of a particular ethnolinguistic group (p.49). At the Italian border town of Trieste, for example, the inclusion of Slovene in public signs demonstrated a political and ethnic tension resulting from the legal recognition of Slovene as another official language (Tufi, 2013). The competing Slovene, though not regarded as equal to Italian, was seen as a disruption to the homogeneity of Trieste's LL. Landry and Bourhis's basic functions are further expanded into the three concepts of *durability, permeability and liminality* (Kimura, 2017). Durability, corresponding to the notion of *territoriality* in border studies, emphasises the idea of language as a border demarcation marker whereas permeability and liminality, corresponding to the notion of *de-territorialization*, pinpoint how language can "transcend and obscure border lines" (p.47). In his own research, Kimura concluded that the use of German and Polish signs reminded onlookers of the fact that German and Polish are two languages without mutual understanding, hence reinforcing the demarcation of the border lines between the two nations. On the other hand, in McKiernan's study (2019), English became the most prevalent language on public signs in the Malaysian border town of Johor Bahru despite the law imposing the mandatory use of Malay. It could be because Johor Bahru has had close economic ties to Singapore and therefore, English as the language of commerce was chosen for

public and business signs, hence helping obscure the border lines between Malaysia and Singapore.

Taking how languages on signs can shed light into the space into consideration, we believed that conducting a LL analysis in NK would allow us to better understand the function of languages on display and the ideologies behind those signs in the border areas where the cultural and linguistic practices are more hybrid, creating the third space as proposed by Bhaba (2004), hence rendering the LL to be freer from that found in big cities.

Research Methodology

Data collection

The following procedures were observed in the data collection stage.

A. Collection sites

We collected signs by taking photographs in three major areas: Thai-Lao border, Lao-Thai border and Tha Sadet market. Apart from the border post, the areas that we covered were 500 metres in a walking distance, consisting of private businesses such as travel agencies, motorized vehicle services, pharmacies, coffee shops and healthcare centres.

Tha Sadet market, located 4 kilometres from the border post, also known as Indochina market, was selected for the study because the name suggested that the place would be catered specifically for tourists; therefore, we expected to see interesting multilingual signs. At the market, different businesses were available such as clothing shops, souvenir shops, restaurants, cafes and hotels.

B. Signs

We collected 257 signs from both public and private sectors, 102 of which were public and 145 of which were private. Note that the public sector included government establishments such as road signs and border stations whereas the private sector referred to privately-owned businesses such as pharmacies and restaurants. Nevertheless, 247 of the signs were used in the analysis because they were visually clear and informative to the pedestrians. These signs were either in front of the establishments or hung above the specific location. The ten signs that were excluded from the analysis were visually unclear.

C. Data analysis

Once the signs were selected, they were initially classified based on their sources: public and private. Then, the signs were divided into four categories based on the number of languages on display: monolingual, bilingual, trilingual and multilingual. In the final stage of analysis, we listed the languages on the signs, counted frequencies and observed the order pattern of the signs. For the purpose of convenience, we assigned the following abbreviations for each language: T for Thai, E for English, L for Lao, C for Chinese, F for French V for Vietnamese and M for Malay. When the abbreviations were put together to illustrate the language patterns of the signs, they were put based on the sequence of appearance and may look like, for example, TEL, standing for Thai-English-Lao.

Findings

The overall findings regarding languages use on the signs are shown in the Table 1. The most visible signs in the areas studied were bilingual, 48%, followed by monolingual, 39%, trilingual, 11%; and multilingual, 2%.

Table 1: The types of signs at the borders and Tha Sadet market

Language(s)	Signs	%
Monolingual	95	39%
Bilingual	119	48%
Trilingual	28	11%
Multilingual	5	2%
Total	247	100%

The finding shows that seven languages were used on the signs; they are Thai, Lao, English, Chinese, Vietnamese, French and Malay. Table 2 shows the most frequent use language on the sign to the least.

Table 2: Frequency of language on sings in the studied areas

Languages	Monolingual	Bilingual	Trilingual	Multilingual	Total
T	73	75	24	4	176
L	7	52	16	5	80
E	0	48	23	5	76
C	1	1	7	3	12
V	0	1	2	3	6
F	0	1	0	1	2
M	0	1	1	0	2
Total	81	179	73	21	354

The findings showed the multiple patterns of language use on the signs and it was found that bilingual signs of national language with English were found the most in both Thai-Lao and Loa-Thai borders, as shown in Table 3. However, monolingual, trilingual, and multilingual sings were more frequently appeared in Thai-Lao border compared to the other side of the border. In Thai-Lao border, signs in Thai, a combination of Thai, English and Lao and multilingual could be seen on both public and private signs. The use of Lao as a monolingual sign was less frequent and French only emerged on the multilingual signs at the Lao-Thai border. In addition, we could not spot any signs of Lao-Thai at all.

Table 3: Frequency of language on signs in Thai-Lao border, Lao-Thai border and Tha Sadet Market

Languages	Thai-Lao Border	Lao-Thai Border	Tha Sadet Market	Total
Monolingual	28	10	57	95
Bilingual	36	44	39	119
Trilingual	18	5	5	28
Multilingual	3	1	1	5
Total	85	60	102	247

Looking at the language display at Tha Sadet market, Thai as a monolingual sign could be seen the most Tha Sadet market, followed by Thai-English signs. Lao was found in only one trilingual sign. Other languages discovered on the signs at the market are Chinese, Vietnamese and Malay; however, they appeared in less than 5% of the total sings at the market. Table 4 showed a detailed summary of patterns of language use on the signs in three areas studied.

Table 4: Summary of patterns of language use on the signs at the borders and Tha Sadet Market

Lang	Thai-Lao Border				Lao-Thai Border				Tha Sadet Market				Total	
	Public Signs		Private Signs		Public Signs		Private Signs		Public Signs		Private Signs			
	Qty	%	Qty	%	Qty	%	Qty	%	Qty	%	Qty	%	Qty	%
T	4	11.1	18	36.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	13	46.4	38	51.4	73	29.6
E	2	5.6	3	6.1	2	5.1	1	4.8	0	0.0	3	4.1	11	4.5
L	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	10.3	3	14.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	2.8
C	0	0.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	4.1	4	1.6
TE	16	44.4	10	20.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	13	46.4	21	28.4	60	24.3
TL	3	8.3	5	10.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	8	3.2
TC	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	1	0.4
TV	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	1	0.4
ET	0	0.0	2	4.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	3.6	1	1.4	4	1.6
EL	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	5.1	3	14.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	2.0
LT	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
LE	0	0.0	0	0.0	27	69.2	12	57.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	39	15.8
MT	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	1	0.4

TEL	1	2.8	4	8.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	2.0
TLE	5	13.9	4	8.2	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	3.6	0	0.0	10	4.0
ETL	2	5.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	0.8
TEC	1	2.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	2.7	3	1.2
TLC	1	2.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.4
TCE	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	1	0.4
ECT	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	1	0.4
LEC	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	4.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.4
LFE	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	5.1	1	4.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	1.2
LFV	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.4
Multi	1	2.8	2	4.1	1	2.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	1.4	5	2.0
TTL	36	100	49	100	39	100	21	100	28	100	74	100	.247	100

Discussion and Conclusion

The investigation into the LL of NK's Thai-Lao border, VT's Lao-Thai border and Tha Sadet market has revealed quite an interesting picture of how languages are manipulated and exploited to create the visual identity of the areas. Our findings show that multilingual signs were frequently used at the border and the area in the radius of 500 metres. The signs displayed a combination of Thai, English and Lao and it seems there are no fixed patterns to explain such an order.

Through our observations, even the Thai-Lao border post, under the operation of the immigration bureau, contains signs with different language orders. That is, we could see Thai-English-Lao signs (Figure 1) next to Thai-Lao-English and English-Thai-Lao (Figure 2) in a top-down order. Also what could be seen was a different language organization. One road sign features Thai in juxtaposition with Lao while English is put under the two languages (Figure 3). Looking further, we could also find a sign with Thai, English and Chinese. The private sector, on the other hand, poses even more nuisances in terms of the language display and order. Pharmacies, travel agencies, motorized transport services and parking spaces with a slightly

bigger Thai font, succeeded by Lao and English are not unusual (Figure 4). Bilingual signs are also featured without much strict order. We have both Thai-English, English-Thai and Thai-Lao. The majority of monolingual signs are in Thai with a smaller number in English.

Figure 1: Trilingual sign of TEL at the Thai-Lao border

Figure 2: Trilingual sign of ETL at the Thai-Lao border

Figure3: Trilingual sign with Thai and Lao on the same level and English below at the Thai-Lao border

Figure 4: Trilingual sign of a pharmacy near the Thai-Lao border

On the other side of the border, however, we can observe a rather fixed pattern of language on display: monolingual signs in Lao, most bilingual signs in Lao and English with very few in English and Lao as well as trilingual signs in Lao, French and English (Figure 5). French is apparently the colonial legacy of French Indochina that ruled Laos from 1893-1954. This observation could be made in both public and private sectors. What we find most surprising is despite the fact that the border is formed by one short bridge, the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, once we cross the border into VT, we cannot see a single sign containing Thai at all. Upon reflection, while the Thai border is more accommodating in the inclusion of Lao in almost all public signs, be it bilingual, trilingual or multilingual, no such attempt or accommodation is to be found in the border post and shops surrounding it. We resort to Ivarsson's (2008) explanations for our discovery. It was suggested that the government's attempt to assert specifically Lao cultural identity could serve "to buttress Laos as a separate Lao space" in relation to Thailand (p.2). Therefore, a possible conclusion is that the Lao scripts are prioritized in most, if not all, signs to project the Lao identity and the Thai alphabets are removed from that culturally-specific space altogether.

Figure 5: Signs of a post office at the Lao-Thai Border: LE sign, LFE sign and LE sign

Misled by the hanging road signs and the seductive name, we explored the Tha Sadet market, or Indochina market, with hope that there would be a high degree of linguistic multiplicity on signs. Disappointed as we were, we included the market in our analysis since it in fact gave us a clearer picture of the conflicting LL situation in NK. The market is located in the centre of NK, 4 kilometres from the border post, and yet the linguistic situation is very different from that of the border post and its surrounding area. That is, half of the privately-own shop signs (51%) are monolingual (Figure 6), featuring only Thai, with only 4% English monolingual signs. The bilingual signs, both public and private, of Thai-English account for approximately 28% and only one trilingual public sign containing Lao exists altogether (Figure 7). This is a big leap from the linguistic nuances that we could identify at the border. The short distance seems to create a large gap, and therefore a different identity, in terms of LL situation. While the border areas are much more linguistically and visually hybrid as we venture to claim them as a third space, the central area of NK is linguistically predictable and much less varied. Lao could not penetrate beyond the 500 metres radius from the border despite it being spoken by the majority of NK residents and a large number of Lao visitors who regularly cross the border to run business and personal errands (Enfield, 1999, 2002).

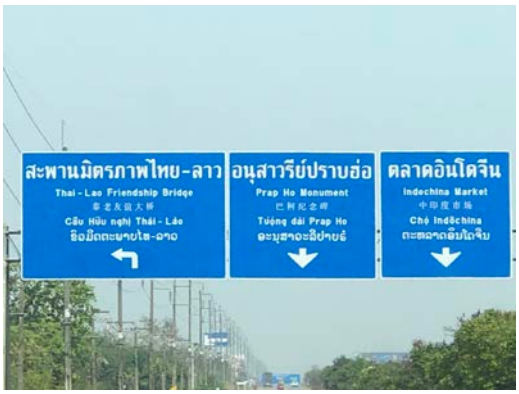
Figure 6: A Thai monolingual sign at Tha Sadet market

Figure 7: Bilingual sign at Tha Sadet market

From our investigation, coinciding with all the previous studies reported in this paper, English emerges as the most dominating foreign language in bilingual and trilingual signs in all the areas investigated. Put aside Thai and Lao, the most prevalent languages in the areas by default, English is the most preferred language and is even chosen over other languages, such as the language of Laos' colonial history, French. The findings reinforce the widely-accepted notion that English remains the one and only language of the international community. In NK, English is way more visible than Lao, the language next door and in Laos, English is employed with the national language while Thai, the language that most, if not all, Lao nationals learn by heart through different media, is not given any visual recognition (Enfield, 1999).

It is worth mentioning briefly that Vietnamese and Chinese scripts can be spotted once in a while but where they appear is worthy of mention. We could identify the two languages on public hanging road signs signaling directions to the border and to Tha Sadet market (Figure 8) as well as in front of some private travel agencies, restaurants, hotels and shops. The inclusion of Vietnamese and Chinese in the public sector is probably an attempt to mark NK as a gateway to other nations around the Mekong. As for the private sector, having the extra two languages could serve their commercial interests.

Figure 8: Multilingual hanging road sign in NK



In conclusion, the paper investigated the LL of NK and VT's border areas as well as Tha Sadet market. We took into account the numbers and frequencies of languages on signs and we looked into the order of languages. What we did not include in our study was the details of font size or the linguistic features of the signs which could affect the way signs should be read and interpreted. Further studies, therefore, can be done on a variety of aspects including font size and linguistic features such as codemixing. The LL investigation should also cover wider areas in the Northeast such as Udon Thani, a bigger province next to NK. To gain more insight into the relevant sign makers' decision making process, interview should be conducted.

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