

## Research Article

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# ‘Little Arabia’ on Buddhist land: Exploring the linguistic landscape of Bangkok’s ‘Soi Arab’ enclave

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**Abstract:** Never formally colonised by Western powers, Thailand is a rapidly developing nation in Southeast Asia. To outsiders, the assumption might be that Thailand is a homogenous Thai-speaking Buddhist country. However, such over-simplistic views ignore diversity and the existence of de facto multilingualism and multiculturalism on the ground. This linguistic landscape (LL) study explores a unique and sociolinguistically compelling area called ‘Little Arabia’ (Soi Arab) in the heart of Bangkok, where elements of both Islamic and Buddhist civilisations meet. The existence of this Middle Eastern enclave creates a sense of contrasts on linguistic, religious, and cultural levels. Because of globalisation and spurred by (medical and sex) tourism, this area boasts a number of halal restaurants, hotels, travel agencies, stores, pharmacies, and clinics. This gives rise to an interesting sociolinguistic ecology, featuring an ‘ethnic’ economy which caters to the needs of tourists and businessmen hailing from the Arab world. Drawing on authentic photographic data, this study explores how various linguistic practices give the area a unique identity. More specifically, we reveal how various languages (including Arabic, Thai, and English) are mobilised and combined in ways that illustrate translation practices evidenced within the enclave for particularised marketing, commercial, and communication purposes. Theoretically and conceptually, the term ‘machine-translated multilingualism’ is coined to capture the growing trend for businesses to resort to translation software for multilingual communication, which may result in non-standard translations and orthographic forms. This study contributes to a growing body of sociolinguistic research examining LLs in global cities and commercial hubs in the Global South, particularly those arising from ‘South-South’ population flows.

**Keywords:** Little Arabia, linguistic landscape, ethnic enclave, translation practices, machine-translated multilingualism, low-end globalisation

## 1 Introduction

To outsiders, Thailand might be easily assumed as a predominantly Buddhist nation with a great degree of internal homogeneity in terms of ethnic make-up and religious and linguistic profile. Such oversimplification, however, ignores the internal diversity and multilingualism in the country particularly against a backdrop of globalisation and increasing people-to-people contact. Strategically located on the Indochinese Peninsula and facing both the Pacific and Indian ocean, Thailand has since ancient times been influenced by the religions, civilisations, languages, and even ways of life of its neighbours such as China and India. This explains the important status of Buddhism in the Southeast Asian nation. Relatively unscathed from the influence of

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Western colonialism witnessed in countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, and India in the region, Thailand was able to modernise and transform itself in a context of globalisation in spite of occasional challenges and setbacks.

After decades of rapid development, Thailand has transformed into a dynamic economy in the region. Thai is the only official language in the country and locals in Thailand might not be as fluent in English as other neighbouring countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and India. However, Thailand has a relatively open, inclusive, and outward-facing economy and a booming tourism industry welcoming people from around the world. As a result of tourism and waves of immigration over an extended period of time, a few ethnic enclaves such as Bangkok's Chinatown, 'Little India' (or Phahurat Market) and 'Little Arabia' have come into being, giving the country a uniquely cosmopolitan feel and contributing to a kind of 'low-end' globalisation (Mathews 2015, Gu 2024a). As such, places such as Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket, and Chiang Mai in Thailand have in many ways become living examples of micro-cosmopolitanism and locales of superdiversity (Blommaert 2013, Vertovec 2007) in the twenty-first century.

Framed against a broader backdrop of globalisation (at both top-down and bottom-up levels), easier mobility, and civilisational contact, this empirical sociolinguistic study explores the somewhat unexpected ethnic and Muslim enclave called 'Little Arabia', 'Arab street', or 'Soi Arab' in the very heart of central Bangkok in the Buddhist majority nation Thailand. In particular, from the perspective of linguistic landscape (LL), this study looks at the visibility and salience of languages such as Arabic, Thai, and English in Bangkok's Little Arabia, aiming to use these as an index to help shed light on the other socio-political, ideological, and cultural dimensions of the city. Given the multilingual and multicultural nature of our global cities, our urban spaces are increasingly important translation zones (cf. Cronin and Simon 2014). Where relevant, this study also seeks to shed some light on the translation practices evidenced by the area's LL. This article starts with some brief discussions of the approach and theoretical framework of LL, the sociolinguistic profile of Thailand, the Arabic language, and some general background on the Little Arabia area. It then elaborates on the data and methodology used in the empirical study, before reporting on the results of the LL research on Bangkok's 'Little Arabia', a commodified ethnic enclave. Framed as part of a major effort that looks at the multilingual LLs of main global business and commercial hubs (Gu 2023a; 2023c; 2024a; Gu and Coluzzi 2024), this study is poised to contribute to scholarship relating to LL in some of our global cities in the global south.

## 2 Linguistic landscape (LL): A theoretical and methodological approach

Hailed as a novel approach to studying multilingualism (Gorter 2006), linguistic landscape (LL) investigates the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs (cf. Landry and Bourhis 1997) in a wide range of contexts and settings. For them, some of the commonly examined objects of LL analysis include street names, public road signs, official signs on government premises, advertising billboards, and commercial shop signs, which combine to form the LL of a given territory, region, or urban space. For Shohamy and Gorter (2009), LL concerns language in the environment, words, and images displayed and exposed in public spaces. This arguably represents an expansion of the initial definition of LL to entail a wider range of objects for potential LL analysis, including such items as slogans, icons, mottos, various images, and even calligraphy (Bhatt 2023) and graffiti that are inscribed or displayed in (public) spaces. This expanded perspective arguably approaches LL from a more inclusive and multimodal and multi-semiotic perspective. In a place's LL, there can be top-down and bottom-up signs (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006). Top-down signs involve signs that are designed and emplaced by various governments, institutions, organisations, and agencies in a more formal and official manner. Bottom-up signs, in comparison, refer to non-official signs enacted by smaller business owners, non-official groups, local communities, and individuals at a grass-roots level.

LL, as a theoretical and methodological approach, is often interdisciplinary in nature and can be seen as being positioned at the intersection of sociolinguistics, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, urban studies, geography, tourism studies, media studies, religious studies, marketing, and social psychology. A locale's LL constitutes a kind of discourse that is socially shaped and socially shaping. A detailed LL study promises to

shed light on the ethnolinguistic, demographic, socio-political, cultural, economic, and ideological dimensions of that particular locale that go beyond the signs themselves. Signalled by Spolsky and Cooper (1991) and Landry and Bourhis (1997)'s seminal publications, LL has gradually established itself as a dynamic and burgeoning area of interdisciplinary research with over 20 years of history. Drawing upon various perspectives and approaches, LL scholars have over the years examined a range of relevant topics and issues. These include but are not limited to multilingualism (Backhaus 2006, Blackwood and Tufi 2015), the symbolic construction of space (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), minority languages (Cenoz and Gorter 2006), ethnolinguistic identity (Landry and Bourhis 1997), heritage literacy (Bhatt 2023), English studies and world Englishes (Dimova 2007, Griffin 2004, Gu and Manan 2024), and language maintenance (Ong and Ben Said 2021).

Over the past 20 years or so, a range of LL studies have been dedicated to exploring various issues in the Global North that includes Europe and North America (Cenoz and Gorter 2006, Leimgruber 2020, Dimova 2007, Bogatto and Hélot 2010, Landry and Bourhis 1997, Blackwood and Tufi 2015, Griffin 2004, Rasinger 2014, Song 2022) and also various other developed economies such as Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong in Asia (Gu 2023a, Backhaus 2006, Lee 2022, Song 2020). Also, there have been a growing number of empirical LL studies focusing on the Global South, which encompasses developing nations in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Southern America (cf. Gu 2023c, 2024a, Gu and Almann 2023, Bhatt 2023, Karolak 2022, Manan et al. 2017). However, Southeast Asia is relatively under-explored and under-represented in extant LL literature, as convincingly argued by Mirvahedi (2022). Some of the few LL studies exploring the Southeast Asian region include Taylor-Leech (2012)'s article on Timor-Leste, Coluzzi (2012)'s article examining the situation in Brunei and Malaysia, the study by Ding (2023) that looks at Kuala Lumpur's rebranded 'Chinatown', Tang's (2020) study focusing on the dominance of English in Singapore's LL, and Gu's (2023b, 2024b) studies exploring the COVID-19-related LLs in Malaysia and Singapore, respectively. More recently, Gu and Coluzzi (2024) explore the presence of the Arabic script in Kuala Lumpur's linguistic landscape in various forms, formats and calligraphy styles.

The observation is also true for Thailand. So far, only a handful of sociolinguistic studies have examined Thailand from a LL perspective. Of these, Huebner (2006) looks at the LLs of 15 Bangkok neighbourhoods, focusing on issues such as language contact, language mixing, and language dominance. Wu et al. (2020) examine a newly emerging Chinatown in Bangkok, focusing on authenticity and conflicting discourses on the Pracha Rat Bampnen Road. In addition, Prasert and Zilli (2019)'s LL study zooms in on Pattaya, Thailand's sin city. Santos and Saisuwan (2023) explore Bangkok's linguistic and semiotic landscape related to the LGBT community. To engage with this relative research gap, drawing on LL as an overarching theoretical framework, this sociolinguistic study examines the Middle-Eastern Muslim tourist enclave Little Arabia's multilingual landscape and, where relevant, the translation practices involved, using a corpus of photographic data collected from the area.

### 3 Thailand: A brief historical, socio-political, and ethnolinguistic account

Located in Southeast Asia, Thailand is a Buddhist-majority country traditionally influenced and shaped by neighbouring civilisations such as China and India in terms of religion, culture, traditions, mores, philosophy, and food. In more recent history, although Thailand was under the influence of Western colonial powers and effectively was a semi-colonial society, the country never formally became a European colony (Baker 2012) as most of its South Asian and Southeast Asian counterparts such as India, Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore did in the broader region.

According to statistics, the primary religion in Thailand is Theravada Buddhism, which is followed by approximately 95% of the people in the country. In terms of language, standard Thai is the sole official language, which is used in such spheres as administration, politics, business, education, media, and justice. Also, according to information from the National Identity Board (2000), (standard) Thai is spoken by almost 100% of the population. Given Thailand's linguistic ecology, at least statistically, the country may be largely seen as highly monolingual and homogenous in nature (Baker 2012). However, this *de jure* monolingualism does not provide the entire picture of Thailand's linguistic diversity and complexity on the ground (as we shall

see later in Section 7). As a matter of fact, behind this seemingly monolithic impression, various regional dialects of Thai are spoken in different locales. In addition, various other languages and dialects including Malay, Chinese, Khmer, and Lao are spoken by minority groups in certain areas (Foley 2005). For example, near the Thailand–Malaysia border, Malay-speaking Thai Muslims can be found in areas such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in Southern Thailand. Also, notably, due to its geographical proximity to China, there have been waves of immigration of people to Thailand from Southern China over centuries. This has resulted in the fact that a large proportion of Thai people are of full or partial Chinese ancestry, including the former political leaders Thaksin Shinawatra and Yingluck Shinawatra. However, for various socio-political reasons and due to centuries of integration and intermarriage, most Thai Chinese abandoned Chinese names and could not speak Chinese.

As a result of globalisation, international tourism, and waves of immigration over an extended period of time, a few ethnic enclaves like Chinatown, Little India, and Little Arabia have come into being, giving the country an increasingly multilingual and multicultural feel. The areas near Khaosan Road and a few other pockets of Bangkok have also become popular and dynamic destinations featuring great multilingualism and multiculturalism over the years, which serve as go-to places for food, accommodation, massage, and entertainment for Westerners and people from different countries around the world.

English plays an increasingly important role in Thailand (Baker 2012), as part of globalisation. As a general rule of thumb, people from the younger generations and those from the tourism industry tend to have a better level of English. However, the population as a whole may have relatively low proficiency in English, compared with neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Singapore. Overall, as far as English is concerned, Thailand may be understood as belonging to the Expanding Circle (Kachru 1985), given the status of English in the country as a foreign language without extensive administrative and official use and the fact that Thailand did not have significant and formal historical/colonial connections with Western powers.

## 4 Arabic: A diglossic and influential language of great complexities

Given the nature of this LL study, some brief discussions are provided here on Arabic. Arabic, as an old and Semitic language, is widely spoken in the Middle East and North Africa, which is also an official language of the United Nations. Unlike many modern languages, Arabic is written from right to left. Arabic, like Chinese, may be understood as a pluricentric language and at the same time a diglossic language (cf. Ferguson 1959) featuring ‘high’ and ‘low’ varieties (with classical Arabic being a standardised literary form and *lingua franca*). That is, firstly, as the language of the Qu’ran, Quranic Arabic or classical Arabic is used in formal religious contexts and liturgy by imams and religious leaders. Given the important role of Arabic in Islam, classical Arabic serves as a unifying liturgical language for Muslims around the world for praying and religious studies, be it in Pakistan and Indonesia or Afghanistan and Morocco. Beyond Quranic Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) also constitutes a formal variety of Arabic, which can be understood as a direct descendent of classical Arabic after some modifications and simplification. MSA is used in a wide range of settings and contexts such as university education, media and journalism, and formal political communication. The variety of formal Arabic used at the United Nations can be viewed as MSA, which is a variety that can be understood by reasonably educated people from all Arabic-speaking countries and regions (even though not all Arabic speakers are comfortable enough to speak this formal variety of Arabic).

Interestingly, all Arabic-speaking countries have their own vernacular languages or local dialects (‘low’ varieties), in addition to classical Arabic and MSA. This is not surprising, given that the Arab world covers a large area and Arabic is an ancient language. Various known as *lahja*, *ammiyah*, or *darija*, Arabic speakers often use a local dialect for everyday communication purposes (e.g. ordering food, shopping, and catching up with friends). For instance, Arabic speakers from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, etc., have slightly different versions of local dialects. Despite the differences, these dialects (collectively called Levantine Arabic or Shami) feature a great degree of mutual intelligibility, forming what can be called a ‘dialect continuum’. Similarly, Khaleeji (or Gulf Arabic) is commonly spoken in the Gulf region in such countries as Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and parts of Saudi Arabia and parts of Iraq, which constitutes a dialect group made up of various local dialects in the region. In (North) Africa, versions of colloquial Arabic are also spoken by locals in Egypt, Sudan,



and Chad. Similarly, people from such countries as Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco tend to speak *darija*, which features unique phonological characteristics and also significant lexical borrowings from French and even Spanish due to colonial influences from France and Spain. These local varieties of Arabic spoken in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco are somewhat mutually intelligible from within yet they may be challenging for other Arabic speakers to understand (e.g. those from Egypt, Syria, the UAE, or Qatar).

This often lack of mutual intelligibility (e.g. between geographically distant varieties) is an issue commonly witnessed throughout the Arabic-speaking regions. As coping strategies, Arabic speakers from geographically distant regions may switch to MSA or classical Arabic. As an alternative, they might also accommodate each other and communicate in an adapted variety called 'white Arabic' (Hopkins et al. 2018). This can be done by speaking more slowly and avoiding using highly regional or slangy words and expressions. It is also not uncommon to see Arabic speakers from different areas gravitate towards a variety akin to Levantine Arabic (commonly spoken in Syria, Palestine, Jordan, etc.) or Egyptian Arabic. This is because traditionally Levantine Arabic and Egyptian Arabic tend to be more prestigious and more widely understood partially for historical reasons and partially due to the influential nature of media in Egypt and the Levant region. Interestingly, Gulf Arabic (e.g. the ones spoken in Doha and Dubai) is gaining popularity and prestige, given the economic success of the region over recent decades. In terms of writing, the Arabic script is used to write classical Arabic, MSA, and also, to a limited extent, local dialects. With the advent of modern technology, Arabic speakers increasingly write local dialects using the Arabic script on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter/X. Interestingly, a relatively new type of writing called Arabizi (Palfreyman and Al-Bataineh 2018) is also becoming increasingly common in Arab countries. This involves writing Arabic through the use of the Latin script (and sometimes numbers) as a form of transliteration. For example, in Arabizi, Arabic words and expressions for 'come on/let's go' and 'welcome! how are you?' can be written as 'yallah' and 'marhaba! kaif halak?'. This is often frowned upon by some as it may detract from the emblematic importance of Arabic script in Islam (Bhatt 2023) and undermine a 'pure' Arabic identity. However, this is commonly used by young people when chatting informally online. It is also worth noting that Arabic – in terms of either script or lexicon – has been a particularly influential language, which over time has shaped such languages as Malay, Indonesian, Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Persian/Farsi, Turkish, Uyghur, Pashto, Swahili and even Northwestern Chinese dialects (e.g. used by Chinese Muslims). This was done through the spread of Islam and historical, civilisational, and people-to-people contact over an extended period of time.

## 5 Little Arabia: a Middle-Eastern Muslim tourist enclave in Central Bangkok

'Little Arabia' is an ethnic and tourist enclave<sup>1</sup> in Bangkok, representing a vivid example of an ethnic economy (cf. Muniandy 2015) developed against a backdrop of globalisation and the movement of people. This particular enclave under discussion is located in North Nana, covering a roughly square area off Sukhumvit Road (a main thoroughfare in central Bangkok). Figure 1 is an illustration of the location of the enclave. This area known as 'Little Arabia' gradually came into being in the 1980s. As a result of globalisation, the growing ease of travelling (e.g. easier visa requirements for people in the middle east), and also due to the popular Bumrungrad International (BI) hospital conveniently located nearby (Cohen and Neal 2012), this area became a hub for middle

<sup>1</sup> While it is not possible to locate detailed information on the Thai government's official policy and stance on multilingualism, multicultural landscape and enclavism, it is reasonable to assume that the Thai government takes a relaxed and open-minded approach, given the country's tourism-driven economy and welcoming attitude towards foreigners in general. Actually, various languages/cultures are permitted to thrive and flourish in pockets of Bangkok and beyond. For example, in addition to the 'Little Arabia' area being investigated here, Japanese can be found in and around Thaniya Road, and Korean is highly visible in and around Sukhumvit Plaza (Korean Town) in central Bangkok. Similarly, South Asian cultures are palpable in and around Phahurat Market and the Indra Square areas in Bangkok, not to mention the old/traditional Chinatown in and around Yaowarat Road and the new Chinatown in Huai Khwang. In small pockets of the city, Bangladeshi-oriented businesses and Ethiopian and East Africa-oriented businesses (shops and restaurants) can also be found. Beyond Bangkok, similar trends are also visible. For example, in Pattaya, there is a 'Chinatown' and also streets/neighbourhoods that feature Arab and Indian-oriented businesses.

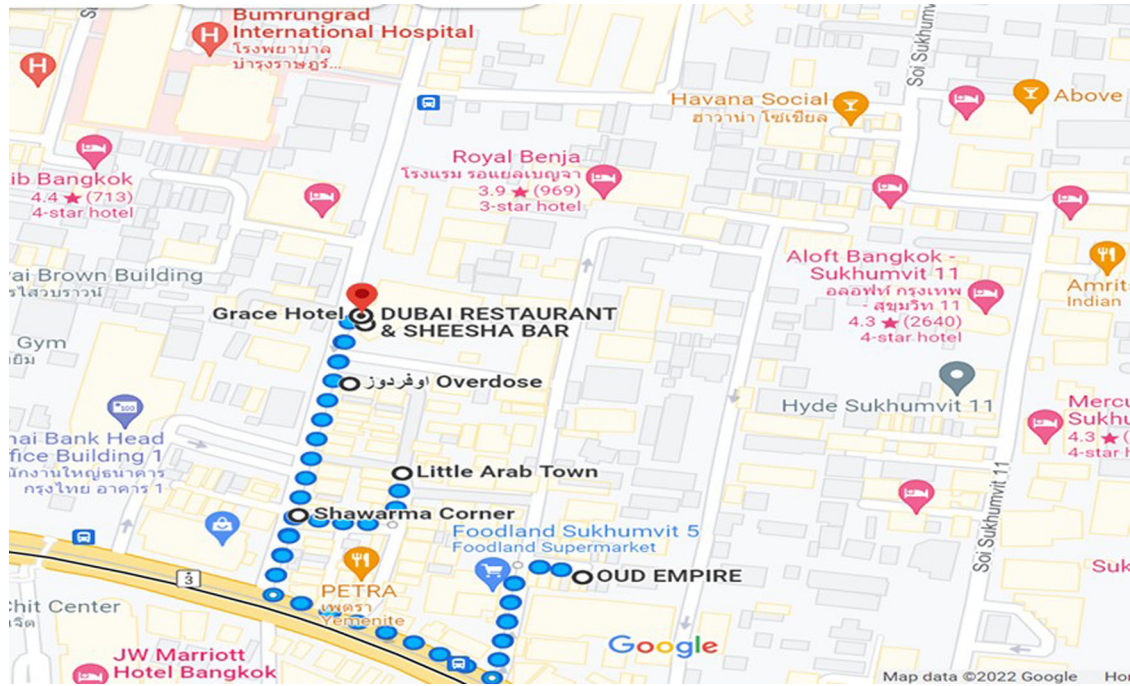


Figure 1: The general location of ‘Little Arabia’.

eastern and Muslim medical and sex tourists as well as travelers in general. This ethnic enclave might be understood as a main locus of low-end globalisation (Mathews 2015) featuring dynamic business, commercial, cultural, and people-to-people contacts at different levels. For some time, the Grace Hotel has been a major landmark in the area (see Figure 1 for general location of ‘Little Arabia’ and Figures 6–8 for a rough idea of the enclave). This area ‘Soi Arab’ in Bangkok, to some extent, is reminiscent of the once-thriving ‘Little Africa’ or Xiaobei area in Guangzhou (Gu 2024a) featuring Arabic signs and the presence of Middle-Eastern and African traders and tourists. This area is also somewhat similar to Ain Arabia or ‘Little Arabia’ in Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur, Wilmslow Road/Rusholme in Manchester, and Edgware Road in London.

According to Cohen and Neal (2012), resembling a Middle-Eastern *souq*, this area can be understood as a Middle-Eastern Muslim tourist enclave in Bangkok. In this commodified urban zone, a number of food stores, oud and perfume shops, clothes shops, halal restaurants, coffee shops, medical services, travel agencies, money-changers, religious facilities, and other venues for entertainment and hedonistic opportunities can be found (Cohen and Neal 2012), catering to the needs of a transient and highly mobile population (e.g. Muslim and middle-eastern tourists, traders, and businesspersons). As far as food and drink, etc. are concerned, typical food items commonly seen in the Arab world such as chicken and lamb shawarma, khubz (Arab-style bread), taboule, and baba ganoush can be found. Also, shisha and Arab-style coffee are available. These give a great sense of authenticity, enabling tourists to replicate the lifestyles typical of their home countries.

The tourists and clients in the Little Arabia area are mostly from the oil-rich Gulf Arab countries (Cohen and Neal 2012) such as Oman, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Other Arabs (e.g. from Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria) and Muslims from Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, India, and central Asian and African countries can also be found. The area occasionally also attracts tourists from other places who are curious and want to sample authentic middle-eastern cuisine and experience the exotic vibes. Apart from local Thai people, some of the people working in the area (e.g. shops, stores, and restaurants) are, for example, from the middle east, Africa, and South(east) Asian countries (e.g. India, Pakistan, Syria, Burma/Nepal, and Sudan). Based on the first author’s observations, many in the broader area are Burmese/Nepali people, who work at restaurants, tailor shops, and inside shopping malls nearby. These people can usually speak languages such as Nepali, Hindi, and English. Also, notably, some Thai people working in the area (Arabian oud/perfume shops, health clinics, and other businesses) can speak some Arabic. These notably include Malay-speaking Thai

Muslims from areas such as Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in Southern Thailand near the Thailand-Malaysia border. Thai, Malay, Arabic, and English are usually part of these Thai Muslims' linguistic repertoire. By and large, this enclave is characterised by an air of Arab-ness and a generic Muslim culture and identity, exuding an unmistakable and exotic Middle-Eastern atmosphere overall (Cohen and Neal 2012). Underneath such a Middle-Eastern atmosphere, this area may also be seen as a fascinating example of micro-cosmopolitanism and a locale of superdiversity (Blommaert 2013, Vertovec 2007) as far as both those serving the customers and those being served are concerned. In this small enclave, human migration/movement of people of different kinds and scales and for different purposes can be found. These include Burmese people of Nepalese descent migrating to Thailand, Malay-speaking Thai Muslims moving to Bangkok from Southern Thailand, and of course people from the Middle East and other Muslim countries (temporarily) visiting and travelling to Bangkok.

## 6 Data and methodology

The data collection and methodology are discussed in this section. Given the status of Bangkok as a global city, the presence of Arabic in Bangkok is of course not restricted to one place only. Actually, Arabic can, for example, be found in a Muslim Chinese halal restaurant near Chinatown (Figure 2), where the Arabic word



Figure 2: Arabic greeting of 'salam' and a halal motif in a Muslim Chinese restaurant near Chinatown.



Figure 3: A top-down sign in English and Arabic emplaced along the Phaya Thai Road outside the MBK Centre (enacted by the local Pathumwan Police Station).





Figure 4: Arabic in the MBK Centre.

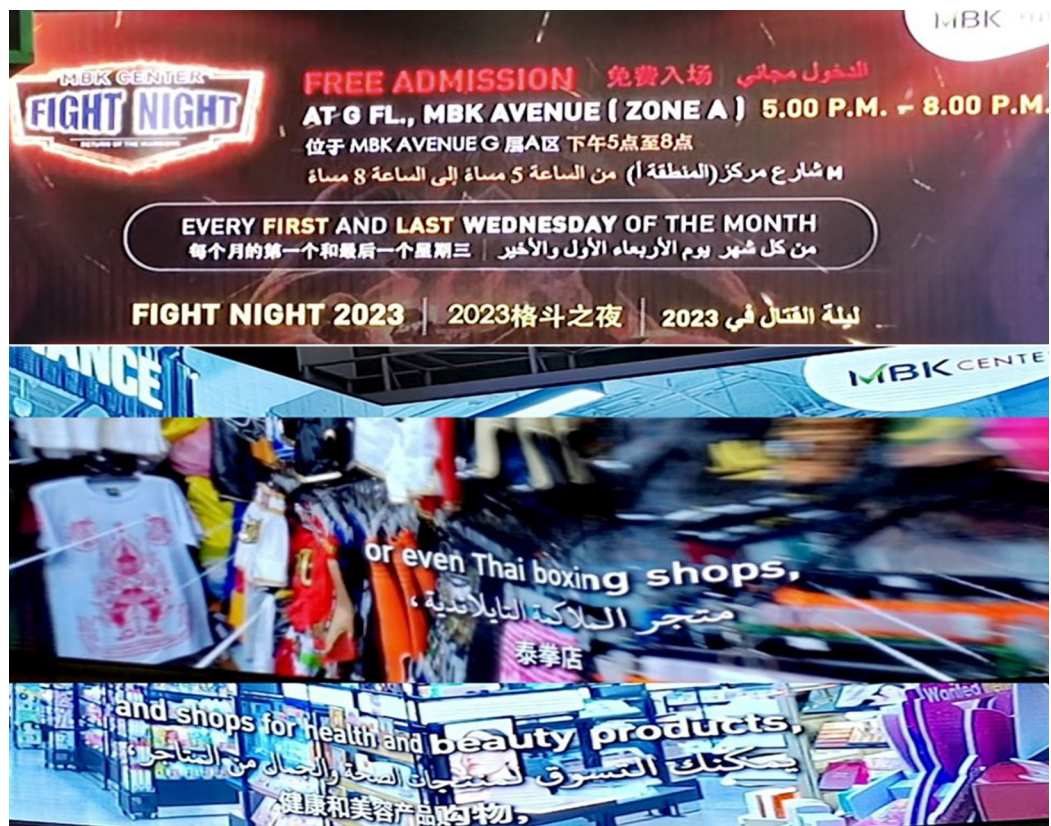


Figure 5: Arabic in the MBK Centre.





Figure 6: General atmosphere of 'Little Arabia'.

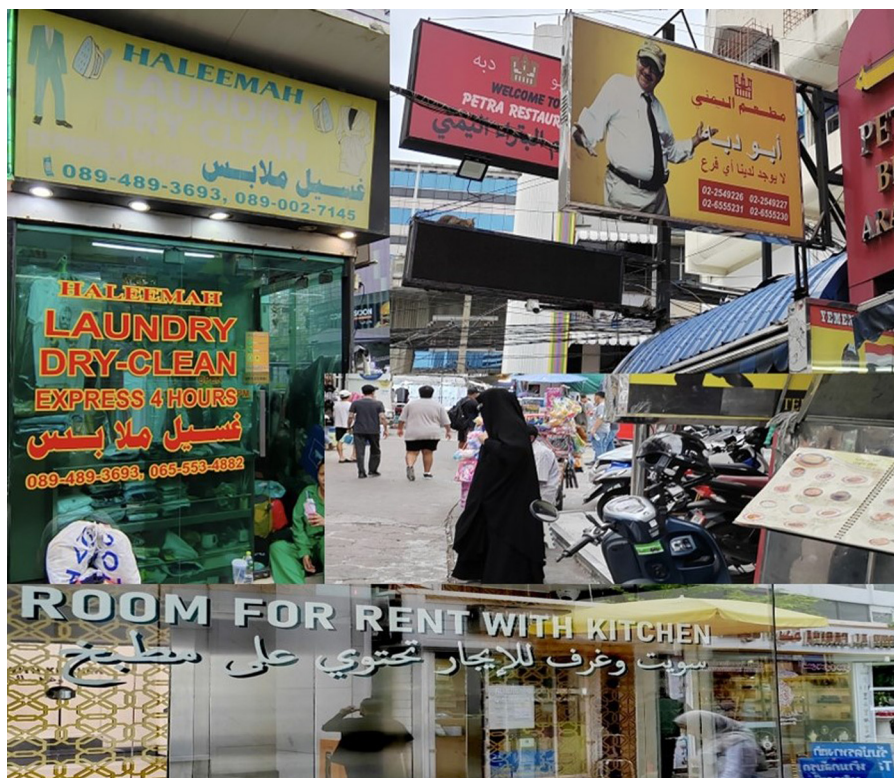


Figure 7: General atmosphere of 'Little Arabia'.



'halal' and expression 'as-salamu alaykum' are visible. Also, a top-down sign in English and Arabic emplaced by the local police can be found along the Phaya Thai Road outside the MBK Center (Figure 3), asking people not to call for taxis there. Also, Arabic is visible in the MBK Center itself (which is frequented by middle-eastern tourists), as seen in Figures 4 and 5.

These, however, are more dispersed across the city. As such, for a more focused LL study with some systematicity, in data collection, attention was mostly focused on the square area which forms the 'Little Arabia' (cf. Figure 1 for a rough idea of its location and Figures 6–8 for a general idea of the ambience and milieu of the enclave). Since the adjacent areas immediately next to Little Arabia proper also feature Arabic to varying degrees, signs from these adjacent areas were also collected and included in the corpus for a more holistic picture. Given the relatively confined nature of the area, all publicly displayed signs visible to the researcher were photographed as far as possible during the researcher's visits.

Interesting data visible inside the premises of shops, travel agencies, clinics, restaurants, etc. were also selectively documented (it was not practical to take photos inside all the businesses in the area). For more comprehensive results, the primary author collected data from Little Arabia and adjacent areas in multiple trips (2–3 hours were spent in each trip) in 2014, 2022, 2023, and 2024. This has resulted in 304 photographs. Data of various kinds are included in the corpus, cutting across different genres and text types (e.g. posters, street signs, shop fronts, billboards, advertisements, and even semiotic data on moving objects). A good quality mobile phone with a photography function was used to capture and document these LL data. Field notes were



Figure 8: General atmosphere of 'Little Arabia'.

also taken to document other details and contextual information. The data were further processed before being systematically analysed.

## 7 Data analysis

As discussed earlier, LL research possesses tremendous descriptive and analytical potential, promising to offer first-line sociolinguistic diagnostic of a particular area with a relatively user-friendly toolkit for detecting the salient sociolinguistic features, be it monolingual or multilingual (Blommaert 2013). As such, the collected data were analysed based, for example, on the languages represented and what languages tend to appear together. The different scenarios and statistical information are presented in Table 1. This serves as an overall statistical base for more detailed, in-depth, nuanced, and contextualised discussions.

As can be seen, Arabic is a highly visible and pervasive feature of this area, which either appears alone or along with other languages. The prominence of Arabic here is expected, given the nature of this ethnic and tourist enclave. However, as far as top-down and bottom-up signage is concerned (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006), in the enclave, all the signs featuring Arabic may be understood as bottom-up signs enacted by individual businesses. In other words, virtually no officially enacted top-down signs (e.g. street name signs) involving Arabic were found in the area. This is in keeping with the *de jure* monolingualism ideology practiced in Thailand, where Thai is the only official language.

Arabic-only signs (45 in total or 14.80% of all signs documented) are relatively prominent in the LL of this area. These signs manifest themselves in various contexts and formats (e.g. advertisements, barber shops, agencies, internet services, hotels, and restaurants). These signs are often highly informative in nature and contain long stretches of text, with the aim of promoting and selling various kinds of products and/or services. From a marketing and promotional perspective, these contents featuring Arabic-only signs are supposed to be highly targeted in nature, assuming Arabic speakers as the target audience/customers. To speakers of other languages, however, these may even seem exclusive. These Arabic-only signs are illustrated in Figures 9 and 10. In Figure 9, for example, these signs are about telecommunication and internet access, insurance, hospital services, shipping options, and different food items and dining options available. Given the more specific and specialised nature of these businesses/services aiming at satisfying Middle-Eastern and Muslim tourists and businessmen's needs, the monolingual Arabic signs make sense. This might partially explain why other languages are not included. In Figure 10 (left) from the PRESTIGE hotel, the sign in Arabic says 'Welcome to Bangkok again. Our team members are all fully vaccinated. We strive to maintain high hygiene standards. We have great offers/promotions to welcome you back'. This warm and reassuring sign shows the willingness and efforts of local businesses to welcome (Middle Eastern) tourists back after the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1:** Languages represented and the percentages

Type	Number (percentage)
Arabic only	45 (14.80%)
English only	19 (6.25%)
Thai only	3 (0.99%)
Arabic and English	139 (45.72%)
Arabic and Thai	36 (11.84%)
Arabic and Chinese	3 (0.99%)
Arabic, Thai, and English	54 (17.76%)
Arabic, Thai, English and Chinese	2 (0.66%)
Other multilingual signs	3 (0.99%)
	Total: 304



Figure 9: Arabic-only signs.

Compared with the sometimes more decorative and symbolic use of Arabic (Gu and Almann 2023) in Dubai (where Arabic in Dubai's LL often is transliterated from English), the use of Arabic in Bangkok tends to be more authentic, informative, and functional Arabic, aiming to convey concrete information to the target audience. This arguably conveys a sense of authenticity and at the same time exoticness to non-Arabic speakers living and/or travelling in the Little Arabia area. It also gives a welcoming 'home away from home' experience to Arabs in the city.

In addition, in terms of code preference, Arabic often appears alongside the global *lingua franca* English in the LL of this area (see Figures 11–13 for illustrative examples). This constitutes the most prominent combination witnessed in the corpus data (139 instances in total or 45.72% of all instances). This particular combination is understandable, given English is a powerful and widely used language globally. However, while the situation differs in each sign, an overall trend is that the information in Arabic and English are often equally prominent, and sometimes the information in Arabic is even more prominent (e.g. more information is provided or bigger font size is used). For example, in Figure 11 (left), Arabic and English in the enlarged menu are almost equally prominent, which can be seen as each other's translation.

This kind of relatively 'neat' one-to-one semantic or phonetic correspondence can also be seen in the three signs in Figure 12 (right). In some of these signs, notably, the Arabic versions are transliterations of the names 'BEAUTY CORNER' and 'Ramez Mini Mart' in English, respectively. The same strategy of transliteration can be found in the name OVERDOSE in Figure 13, where the Arabic name is a phonetic representation of the name in





Figure 10: Arabic-only signs.

English. In other cases, the information in Arabic is more prominent/detailed. For instance, in the 'Masters suites' example in Figure 11 and the 'GLASS NANA' example in Figure 12, significantly more detailed information in Arabic has been provided. Similarly, in Figure 14 (left), a bilingual sign (about cannabis), the Arabic information is significantly more prominent and more detailed than the English version ('CANNABIS DISPENSARY'). In the Arabic version, more details are provided to emphatically highlight that different types of 'high quality' cannabis-related products are available 'daily'.

Sometimes unique Arabic calligraphic styles are used, which makes the information in Arabic stand out more. The 'Al SADDAH restaurant' example in Figure 11 and the 'IRAQI RESTAURANT BY ABDOLAH KASHI' example in Figure 13 are salient illustrations of this, where traditional Arabic calligraphic styles are used to make the Arabic words more conspicuous and authentic-looking.

In addition, Arabic may also appear together with Thai. More frequently, Arabic, Thai, and English tend to appear together (54 instances or 17.76%), which combination is illustrated in Figures 15 and 16. Interestingly, in the 'MIDDLE EAST HOTEL & RESTAURANT' example (Figure 16), both the English word "Middle East" and its more literal Arabic version are used. However, it is worth noting that Arabs do not usually refer to themselves by using the generic term الشرق الأوسط (or "Middle East"). Actually, Arabs in Arabic-speaking countries tend to use classical demarcators and/or geographical and historical names such as Sham (Levant), Khaleej, Iraq, Hijaz, Yemen, and Maghreb. This to some extent shows the more generic nature of the business, targeting possibly people from different Arab countries, Muslims in general, and even non-Muslims. This makes sense, given this is an Arab enclave and a touristy area in a non-Arab country.



Figure 11: Signs featuring Arabic and English.

As evidenced by these trilingual signs, English and Arabic tend to be consistently prominent. However, although Thai is included, Thai is often relatively marginalised and made less prominent. This seems very interesting and is reflective of the general observation of the researcher in the area overall. According to Shohamy (2006), the relative presence or absence of a language in a particular area communicates symbolic messages about its importance, power, significance, and relevance *vis-à-vis* others. Despite the fact that Bangkok and Thailand in general are Thai-speaking, Thai is relatively less represented/made less prominent in this area. Only three signs are in Thai alone (0.99% of all). Even in the instances where Thai is visible alongside other languages (e.g. Arabic), only relatively short stretches of texts in Thai can be found and are usually designed in small font sizes compared with other more prominent languages such as Arabic and English. This relatively low prominence and relative marginalisation (Scollon and Scollon 2003) of Thai in visual terms in this area can be explained by the fact that this is not a local area necessarily frequented by Thais. In other words, Thai lacks informational value here in the Little Arabia area. This is in line with the nature of this area as an ethnic enclave and tourist spot, mostly catering for non-Thai people. From this perspective, LL as a kind of socially shaped discourse is both reflective of the broader socio-political and ethnolinguistic reality and can, once enacted, potentially also further shape reality and create certain images about a particular locale.

In this highly commodified LL, other languages such as Chinese and Hindi/Sanskrit also appear in a small number of instances, despite the prominence of such languages as Arabic. These small number of multilingual signs point to the diversity and cultural hybridity of this area. This, for instance, is exemplified in Figure 17. In these multilingual signs, often different language versions are not merely just equivalents or each other's





Figure 12: Signs featuring Arabic and English.

translations in the traditional sense. Instead, they tend to enact different meanings specifically for different target audiences.

In Figure 17 (left), information in Thai, Arabic, English, and Chinese can be found. Clearly, the information in different versions is not exactly the same. For example, in English, it highlights that the restaurant specialises in Arabic, Indian, and seafood. Interestingly, in the Chinese text, it simply says 中国菜 (Chinese food). Furthermore, at the bottom, additional information “كل براني موجود” (all kinds of biryani available) in Arabic also represents targeted communication based on a different target group. This shows that the different multilingual versions are sometimes not just mechanic translations of each other but are rendered in a conscious and targeted way to attract different customers. Similarly, another multilingual sign can be found in Figure 17 (right), enacted by Akbar restaurant. Overall, information in the Arabic script is arguably the most prominent and features the most details. For example, the Arabic text explicitly highlights that Indian and Pakistani food is available and the food served is halal. Also, notably, स्वागतम् (swagatam) is highly visible in the sign, which is a Sanskrit/Hindi word meaning ‘welcome’ (which is also widely understood by speakers of such languages as Hindi, Nepali, Marathi, Gujarati in Northern India and Nepal). Presumably, this indicates, for example, that Hindus are also welcome in addition to Muslims. Also, SALAMAT DATANG (sic) can be found, which is written in small font size. ‘Selamat datang’ is a Malay/Bahasa Indonesia expression meaning ‘welcome’. The strategic use of multilingual signs in the Little Arabia area can be seen as a clever marketing strategy to appeal to different ethnolinguistic and religious groups and to maximise the customer base. This shows that translation and multilingual communication in general may be understood as a dynamic, targeted,



Figure 13: Signs featuring Arabic and English.



Figure 14: Signs featuring Arabic and English.





Figure 15: Trilingual signs in Arabic, Thai, and English.

and purposeful activity (Vermeer 1998). Overall, these multilingual signs point towards what we call ‘linguistic bet-hedging’ or ‘bet-hedging multilingualism’. That is, in diverse and touristy places (e.g. Bangkok and Pattaya), rather than putting all the eggs in one basket, some businesses resort to this marketing and advertising strategy to attract and appeal to customers from a (super)diverse range of linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds.

In addition, despite the relatively small number, another salient trend that emerges from a careful analysis of the data extracted from Little Arabia and adjacent areas is what can be called ‘Google translate multilingualism’ or ‘machine translated multilingualism’. This involves the often incorrect use of certain language (e.g. spelling, grammar, punctuation use, and generally accepted formatting) by the general public and sometimes even official actors without due knowledge of a language. That is, at a time of increasing Internet connectivity and technological development, employees and business owners may routinely resort to various free online translation software and tools (e.g. Google translate) for the purpose of multilingual communication, rather than using the support or service of professional and qualified translators.

This, for example, is evidenced in Figure 18. Figure 18 (top) features a bilingual sign emplaced by a massage parlour. While the information in English is more or less correct, the information in Arabic is incorrect/poorly formatted. For example, ‘foot massage’ in Arabic should be *تدليك القدم* (tdlik alqdm). However,



Figure 16: Trilingual signs in Arabic, Thai, and English.



Figure 17: Two multilingual signs found at two restaurants.





Figure 18: Incorrectly formatted Arabic in two signs.



Figure 19: Incorrectly formatted Arabic.





Figure 20: Incorrect and awkward information in Chinese.

in the incorrect and poorly formatted Arabic version, the Arabic letters are disjointed and are written from left to right, as opposed to the correct order of Arabic (from right to left). In other words, to Arabic speakers, the incorrect and poorly formatted information reads like ‘m d q l a k i l d t’. This is somewhat like writing ‘thank you very much’ incorrectly as ‘hcum yrev uoy knaht’. This presumably was translated by someone without knowledge of Arabic using online software who then incorrectly copied and pasted the text to the space. A similar example can be found in Figure 19 taken in front of the Siam Paragon shopping mall, about 20–30 minutes’ walk from the Little Arabia proper. Again, the information in Arabic has been formatted backwards, presumably done by people without knowledge of the language. We might say that in those Arab-oriented businesses, some are run/managed by Arabs and some are run/managed by local non-Arabic-speaking Thai people trying to attract Arabic-speaking customers.

These incorrectly formatted texts featuring Arabic are symptomatic of a more general issue witnessed in recent years, that is ‘machine-translated multilingualism’. Arguably, as a result of the uncritical and taken-for-granted use of free translation software online, incorrect, awkward, unidiomatic, and poorly formatted translations can be found in the LLs of our societies. Rather than just chalking it up to poor language competency and language error, this is part of a broader recent sociolinguistic phenomenon witnessed in different parts of the world. Beyond the Arabic examples, this phenomenon is also visible in Bangkok and Thailand’s multilingual LL involving other languages such as Chinese (cf. Figure 20). For example, 划算的条件 in the Chinese text (Figure 20, top) is awkward and unidiomatic and as a result difficult to understand. This phenomenon can also be found even in cities such as Liverpool and Manchester in the UK (Figure 21) and elsewhere.

For example, in Figure 21 (left), this was a warning sign in Chinese found in a construction site just outside Liverpool’s Chinatown. The information in Chinese is 安全头盔，靴子和背心一定是旧的超越这个点, which literally means ‘safety helmets, boots and vests must be old beyond this point’. This is a highly awkward,



**Figure 21:** Other examples of ‘machine translated multilingualism’ (e.g. Chinese) in the UK.

strange, and illogical sentence in Chinese. It was highly likely that the person typed the English sentence ‘safety helmets, boots and vests must be worn beyond this point’ into translation software and then the awkward translation was produced. This was to do with the ambiguous nature of the English word ‘worn’, which can both mean the passive form of ‘wearing’ and ‘old’ (e.g. worn-out shoes). The erroneous translation also highlights the sometimes unreliable nature of translation software.

## 8 Conclusion

Despite the homogeneity on the surface, Thailand is not impervious to multiculturalism and multilingualism. Framed against a backdrop of globalisation and an increasingly diversified linguistic climate, this LL study has surveyed the visibility and salience of languages such as Arabic in Bangkok’s Little Arabia, a commodified urban space and ethnic enclave catering to the needs of Muslim and Arab tourists in a Buddhist majority nation marked by *de jure* monolingualism. Drawing on a corpus of empirical real-world data extracted from Little Arabia and adjacent areas, this linguistic landscaping study highlights the prominence of Arabic, either alone or alongside other languages such as English, as evidenced by a range of signs in the area, including restaurants, massage parlours, travel agencies, and clinics. Sometimes, these Arabesque features are used emblematically, as the Perso-Arabic script carries immense symbolism through its visual representation, becoming iconic of something essential about that which it indexes (see Bhatt 2023). In comparison, the official language Thai is relatively less represented in the area (e.g. very few Thai-only signs and small font size is used). This relative marginalisation of Thai in Little Arabia is unsurprising, which is commensurate with the external-facing nature of this ethnic enclave as an area largely visited by a transient population from overseas yet less frequented by local Thais. Interestingly, it is noteworthy though that virtually all of these signs involving Arabic are bottom-up ones enacted by the individual businesses. In other words, by virtue of the official language policy and linguistic ideology, Arabic is not officially sanctioned and supported to appear on official signage of any kind.

Furthermore, the Arabic used on the LL of the Little Arabia and adjacent areas is highly authentic and rich in informational value overall, serving to provide relevant information and details to the target customers.

This scenario is unlike the situation in Dubai, where Arabic is often not authentic Arabic but symbolic and decorative Arabic transliterated directly from English (Gu and Almann 2023). This is also different from the situation in Pakistan where English is often hidden in the Perso-Arabic/Urdu script phonetically (Manan et al. 2017). The widespread presence of Arabic (alongside authentic Middle Eastern food etc.) gives a sense of authenticity. That is, this gives a unique ‘home away from home’ feeling for Arabs from the Middle East and people from the Muslim world in general. The authentic and exotic nature of the area also meets the appetite of adventurous and curious tourists from non-Arab countries. From this perspective, Little Arabia along with other areas such as Khaosan Road, Chinatown, Little India, and Little Tokyo in Bangkok together form a whole package, contributing to Thailand’s multilingual and multicultural landscape and overall repertoire as far as tourism is concerned. In addition, in a relatively small number of cases, a phenomenon coined by the authors as ‘machine translated multilingualism’ can be found in Bangkok’s LL. That is, incorrect, awkward, or poorly formatted language use can be seen in the urban space’s LL as a result of people not speaking the language attempting to translate and communicate multilingually facilitated by such tools and software as Google translate. This represents an interesting feature in Bangkok’s LL involving such languages as Arabic and Chinese (which is also increasingly seen elsewhere in the world).

Given the constantly changing nature of a city’s LL, the results reported here are only true of the recent few years. The findings may be subject to change over time. As avenues of future research, it may be interesting to explore the LL of the Little Arabia area diachronically to trace any shifts or changes. The analysis may also be strengthened with more statistical analysis and/or triangulated with other methods. Also, other tourist spots and ethnic enclaves in Bangkok (e.g. Little India) may be systematically explored going forward from a LL perspective. These promise to yield interesting findings. Essentially interdisciplinary in nature, this empirical study contributes to LL, sociolinguistics, translation studies, interlingual and intercultural communication, anthropology, tourism studies, Southeast Asian studies, and geography amongst others. Given the nature of this study, it contributes to a better understanding of the LLs of developing countries in the global south from socio-political, cultural, ethnolinguistic, and religious perspectives. It also promises to contribute to a growing body of recent work examining LL in our dynamic and increasingly multilingual and multicultural urban spaces in the twenty-first century against a backdrop of globalisation (Gu 2024a, Gu and Manan 2024, Karolak 2022, Lee 2022).

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