



## Linguistic Landscape at Patong, Phuket, Thailand : language perception on public signs

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### Abstract

This research on language phenomena of public signs in Patong Beach of Phuket Province, which is a famous tourist destination of Thailand, consists of two objectives: to analyze language characteristics on public signs in Patong Beach; and to analyze the relationship between the language on the signs and the context of Phuket tourist city. Data were collected from 689 signs of government and business sectors. The data were analyzed using the conceptual framework of linguistic landscape of Landry and Bourhis (1997). The findings indicated that the most common languages on the signs were Thai and English, with Thai always having a position above English, while English has larger fonts than Thai. This illustrates Thailand's tourism policy in providing information to tourists through the use of English as an international language, which is in line with the promotion of Phuket as an international tourist destination. Chinese and Arabic languages are also mostly found on signs, which represent the large number of tourists visiting Phuket. Therefore, informational public signs must accommodate the main tourists in the area.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Landscape, Sociocultural Linguistics, Public Sign, Tourist City, Phuket

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### Introduction

Thailand is a country that depends on revenue from tourism. In 2019, the revenue from foreign tourists in Thailand, in descending order, included those from East Asia, Europe, America, South Asia, Oceania, the Middle East, and Africa, respectively. There were more than 66 million foreign tourists visiting Bangkok, followed by Chonburi with 18 million, and Phuket with 14 million (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2020) in response to the Phuket City Development Policy of the Thai government. Number of these tourists in Phuket speak various different languages. And number of them has been reported increasingly every year. In 2019, a 77% increase covered 3.1 million Chinese, 980,000 Russians, 670,000 Germans, 420,000 Australians, 340,000 British, South Korea, Japan, and France with 220,000 each, 180,000 Sweden, and 180,000 Indians (THERABKK, 2019). The tourists from these 10 major nationalities speak different mother tongues.

Phuket Province is a major tourist destination and crowded with tourists in Patong Beach, which is the world-famous beach and recognized as a living room of Phuket (Patong Municipality Office, 2021). It has been developed into a natural and health tourism area as indicated by the government's Tourist City Development Plan of 2021 under the Phuket Tourism Sandbox Policy (Phuket Provincial Order, 2021). According to the survey on factors affecting satisfaction of foreign tourists traveling to beaches in Phuket, it was found that safety factors and beach characteristics had the greatest effect on satisfaction. The tourists suggested that beach administrators should pay more attention to the signs that indicate the purpose to the readers either texts or symbols, including warning information, prohibitions or clear instructions in order to reduce accidents or deaths of tourists (Soonsan and Somkai, 2020). In addition, tourists also gave business suggestions that there should be a description of the tourist attractions and product names in Russian for facilitating communication and understanding (Jonglerdjesdawong and Booranakittipinyo, 2017). Language on the sign is considered important to the economy, as tourists see the message on the sign, they respond by becoming a customer (Akers Signs, 2007).

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Research on a linguistic landscape has been developed over the past 20 years. Landry and Bourhis (1997) proposed that public signs have two important functions. The function of providing information is carried out by the intention of sign creators both government signs and private signs. And the symbolic function is the function of public signs that convey cultural meanings, government policies, social dimensions, and Thai culture. Later, scholars applied this concept to analyze public signs in multilingual cities and economic cities, such as major cities in Japan, Taiwan, Finland, Russia, Jordan, China, as well as comparison between Poland and Germany and comparison between Poland and Lithuania, etc. (Backhaus, 2007; Curtin, 2009; Pietikäinen & Holmes, 2011; Muth, 2014; Lana & Rababah, 2021; Lu, et al., 2021; Gerst & Klessmann, 2015; Ruzaitė, 2017). Countries in the ASEAN region analyze the signs in economic areas such as Cambodia, Singapore, etc. (Kasanga, 2012; Rungswang, 2018), including Thailand, especially in the economic areas of Bangkok such as Sukhumvit, Chinatown, Phra Athit Road, Soi Nana Nuea and Soi Ekkamai (Huebner, 2006; Siricharoen, 2016; Sarot and Kraisame, 2019; Meemongkol, 2021) and the Pattaya beach tourist city (Prasert and Zilli, 2019). Most of the research results mostly found English on public signs as it is an international language and is the main language of communication. However, previous research has not been conducted in Phuket, which is the main tourist city with people from various countries.

The use of languages on public signs is thus evidence of the dynamics of language movement in public areas and provides a visual representation of empirical language use to general public and is likely to be a tool for balancing language power through the concept of language landscape analysis (Prasithratsint, et al., 2020). Language is also socially related as a result of social contact, culture, race and nationality. The concept of sociocultural linguistics is thus used to describe the situation around an individual and to describe the phenomenon of language that corresponds to cultural influences (Bucholtz and Hall, 2008). Therefore, the two objectives this research aim to analyze the language characteristics appearing on public signs and to analyze the relationship between languages on public signs and tourist cities.

The research on the linguistic landscape at Patong Beach is not only an extension of previous research in Thailand to be completed, but also providing new knowledge about communication through public signs, which is beneficial to improve the information on the signs to be complete, correct and comprehensive. As a result, foreign tourists are facilitated by information on public signs. If information can be communicated to foreign tourists well, it will allow tourists to travel comfortably in Patong Beach. It will also increase number of tourists at Patong Beach because they don't have to worry about different language. In addition, the research results can be applied to the development of Thailand's tourist cities, including the application of language design on public signs, sales promotional materials, and the utilities related to communication to foreigners to create tourism value. This will reflect the symbolic function representing that the public and private sectors have policies and prioritize communication with foreign tourists, which is good for the economy. This is consistent with the vision of Patong Municipality on "Patong City never dies".

## Methods

This research used a mixed-research methodology in linguistics consisting of qualitative research, using Landry and Bourhis (1997)'s linguistic landscape concept, and quantitative research to analyze data frequencies as follows:

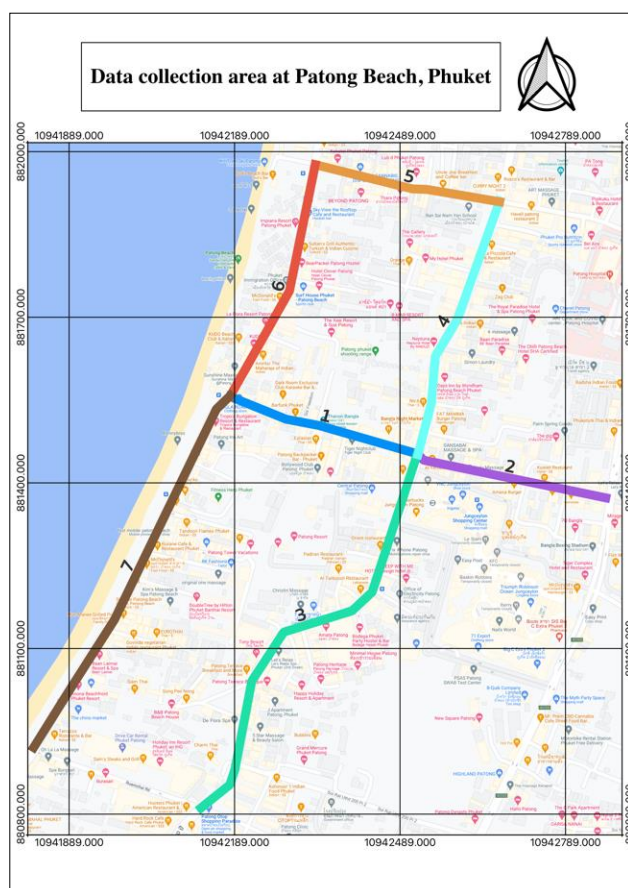
**1. Population:** This research collected all available signs of both government and business sectors. The business signs were chosen by applying the criteria of Prasert and Zilli (2019) and Sarot and Kraisame (2019), including service business, food and beverage business, accommodation business, local business, hospitality and tourism business, transport business, other business signs and temporary signs. In terms of government signs, the criteria of the Department of Highways (2018) were implemented, which included mandatory signs, warning signs, national highway signs, high standard highway signs, traffic signs for specific lanes, traffic signs of information and services, signs for recommending places and tourism, and other signs.

**2. Research tools:** The iPad 2018 camera with 8 megapixel resolution and 128GB storage capacity was used for taking photos and recording data of the signs, as well as Google Translate Version 6.45.1 application for language translation, Google Drive Version 4.2022.42201 application as a backup source, Google Earth Version 9.154 application to define the research area, and the QGIS program Version 3.28, a geographic information system for positioning the boundary of the data collection in both latitude and longitude, to determine the routes for analysis efficiently.

**3. Data collection methods:** The research collected data twice with an interval of five months. The first data collection was conducted in March 2022, when Thailand was still facing the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) situation, causing foreign tourists to quarantine according to the Phuket Tourism Sandbox Policy. The second one was made in August 2022, when the Thai government had a policy to

open the country allowing foreign tourists to travel without quarantine. The signs of both government and business sectors were found from both data collection.

The population boundary was defined as the primary data, which is the public signs that appear around Patong Beach as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Data collection area at Patong Beach, Phuket (Photo by the researcher)

Figure 1 shows the data collection areas of public signs at Patong Beach in Phuket dividing into seven data collection points with a walking distance of 3.45 kilometers for taking photos from all actual locations. The data were collected from 689 signs of government and business sectors. The files of all sign photos have been stored in the PNG format using a Google Drive as a backup source.

**4. Data analysis methods** were divided by research objectives as follows:

4.1 Analysis of the language characteristics on the public signs at Patong Beach, Phuket. Previous research analyzed only number of languages and text position, or analyzed only number of languages and font size. This research therefore analyzed number of languages, text position, and font size displayed on the signs. The first step considered the types of public signs including single-language signs, bilingual signs, and multilingual signs according to Huebner (2006)'s criteria. After that, the text position of each language on public signs were identified with upper or lower appearance based on Sarot and Kraissame (2019)'s criteria. The last step considered the size of the fonts on public signs according to Meemongkol (2021)'s criteria.

4.2 Analysis of the relationship between languages on public signs and the tourist city in the context of Phuket.

## Results and Discussions

### 1. Characteristics of languages on public signs at Patong Beach, Phuket

In this section, types of signs, text position, and font size on the signs at Patong Beach area will be explained as follows:

#### 1.1 Types of public signs

There are 689 public signs at Patong Beach, which can be divided into three categories: single-language signs, bilingual signs, and multilingual signs.

Bilingual signs are commonly used in Patong Beach, accounting for 56% of the total number of signs, followed by single-language signs accounted for 26% and multilingual signs accounted for 18%. It was found that the number of bilingual signs was about two times higher than that of single-language signs and about three times more than multilingual signs. Therefore, those involved in making signs should develop more multilingual signs by adding the mother tongues of foreign tourists, which will increase business profits. In addition, Cenoz and Gorter (2009) stated that multilingual signs have three positive effects: providing the opportunity to attract more tourists due to its friendly environment, avoiding minority conflicts, and representing the image of a modern or multicultural city.

When comparing language characteristics on bilingual and multilingual signs, it was found that the signs in Thai appearing together with English had the highest number as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2** Language characteristics on public signs (Photo by the researcher)  
**Thai and English:** "Tour information"

According to Figure 2, it is a sign for service and tourism business with a text in Thai transliterated from English that says 'ทัวร์ อี้นฟอร์เมชัน' and in English that says 'Tour information'. It can be consequently seen that the bilingual signs of Thai and English are mostly found in Patong Beach. This is consistent with Spolsky (2009) stating that in any areas where one language is the predominant communication, single-language signs is often found. But if there are foreign tourists traveling into the area, it is often found that bilingual signs are used because bilingual signs are intended to communicate with locals and foreigners. Therefore, public signs at Patong Beach provide Thai language for communicating with Thai people, as well as English for communicating with foreigners who use English in everyday life and as a lingua franca.

#### 1.2 Text position on public signs

When considering only 511 signs including 385 bilingual and 126 multilingual signs, it was found that the signs with Thai at the top and English at the bottom appeared the most, as shown in Figure 3.





**Figure 3** Text position on public signs (Photo by the researcher)

**Thai and English:** “Patong seafood”

According to Figure 3, it is a sign of food and beverage business. Thai letters are displayed above indicating that ‘ป่าตองซีฟู้ด’ and the English below it says ‘PATONG SEAFOOD’. It can be seen that Thai often has a position above English. This text position is most common in Patong Beach.

The position of the text emphasizes that Thai is the most important language on the sign, which is related to the Sign Tax Act No. 2 B.E.2564 on the cost of sign tax rates. If Thai language is placed on top of a foreign language, the tax rate would be 26 baht per 500 square centimeters, which lower than the tax rate of the sign with English on the top that costs 50 baht per 500 square centimeters (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 2020). This represents that the most important or more prominent things will be at the top, while the less important or less prominent ones are listed below (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). The importance in the context of the signs at Patong Beach relates to the sign tax law in which all entrepreneurs want to pay less taxes.

#### **1.4 Font size on public signs**

When comparing the size of the fonts on the sign as shown in Figure 3 as mentioned earlier, it was found that English has a larger font size than Thai. The size of such fonts is most common in Patong Beach where English is always larger than Thai even though English is positioned below Thai. This phenomenon can be explained as the Sign Tax Act No.2 B.E.2564 is based on the text position but does not specify the font size, so the size of English on the signs at Patong Beach is always larger than Thai. In addition, although English appears with other languages, it is also found that English often has the largest font size.

The area factor therefore affects the size of the font. Languages with the largest and most pronounced fonts tend to be the mother tongue of the target audiences who are likely to read the sign (Meemongkol, 2021). Moreover, this phenomenon is also common in English language in Thailand where the area of the sign is used the most, which reflects its prominence in the boundary language landscape of Thailand (Huebner, 2006).

Therefore, the analysis of the three aspects of the language on public signs, including sign type, text position, and font size indicated that the languages on public signs at Patong Beach are related to the mother tongue that corresponds to the country of the customers because it has a good effect and increase the business benefits. It is also related to the law on the Sign Tax Act No.2 B.E.2564 and the language on the sign is all about those involved in the making of the sign. This is consistent with Spolsky (2009) indicating that the sign-related factors consist of the sign maker’s language ability, the goal of communicating to the sign readers, and the sign makers use their own language or the language they want to identify to show their ownership.

## 2. Relationship between languages on public signs and tourist city of Phuket context

In this topic, the phenomenon of languages on public signs and communication functions related to society and people in the tourist city area of Patong Beach are explained. It consists of pharmacy sign, massage parlor sign, tsunami sign, sea swimming instruction sign, food stall sign, and real estate sign as follows:

### 2.1 Pharmacy signs

There are two types of pharmacy signs in Patong Beach. The first type consists of Thai, English, Chinese and Russian languages. The second one consists of Thai, English, Chinese, Russian and Arabic, as shown in Figure 4.

The two types of signs are different. The pharmacy of first type sign does not provide medicines specifically intended for Muslim consumers, while the medicines in second type of store are available for Muslim and have halal production processes according to Islamic law in accordance with the regulations of the Central Islamic Council of Thailand on the management of Halal affairs, B.E. 2558 (Office of the Central Islamic Council of Thailand, 2015). The second type of pharmacy is a franchise pharmacy with a pharmacist who can explain about medicines in English. If foreign customers cannot communicate in English, they will use an application to translate medicine names from Arabic to English.

Therefore, all types of pharmacy signs should be adapted to be available in Thai, English, Chinese, Russian and Arabic languages in order to accommodate tourists of all ethnic groups and religions.



**Figure 4** Pharmacy sign (Photo by the researcher)  
**Thai, English, Chinese, Russian and Arabic: “Pharmacy”**

### 2.2 Massage parlor signs

There are 133 entrepreneurs of massage parlors in Patong Beach (Patong Municipality Office, 2021). Massage parlor signs usually use English, Chinese, and Russian, as shown in Figure 5. The presence of Chinese and Russian languages as the main target groups of tourists who are from China, Russia and Europe (Aksornpairoj, et al., 2020), especially Russian tourists who prefer to buy health souvenirs (Jonglerdjesdawong and Booranakittipinyo, 2017) and prefer beach vacations and spa services (Worraphantakit, et al., 2022).

Therefore, all massage parlor signs should be adjusted to have Thai, English, Chinese and Russian languages in order to correspond with the main groups of tourists who use massage services and spas that are Chinese and Russians.



**Figure 5** Massage and spa parlor sign (Photo by the researcher)  
**English, Russian and Chinese:** “Original one Massage & Spa”, “Thai massage”, “Foot massage”, “Oil massage”

### 2.3 Tsunami signs and swimming instruction signs

Patong Beach was affected by the tsunami disaster on December 26, 2004, which took place more than 17 years ago. That incident caused many deaths and damaged businesses. After the incident, the sign ‘Tsunami Hazard Zone’ was made, appearing from the beach area of latitude 7.893952N and longitude 98.295300E and will be installed in all areas where the tsunami reaches. The sign indicating risky areas is important to make tourists aware and careful in the event of an unexpected disaster.

There is also a sign “Evacuation Route” consisting of Thai, English and Chinese as shown in the Figure 6.



**Figure 6** Evacuation route sign (Photo by the researcher)  
**Thai, English and Chinese:** “Evacuation route”

According to the data analysis, it was found that providing information on tsunami hazard zones, evacuation route, and the safety points from the tsunami were available with different number of languages. Some signs appeared only in Thai and English. Some signs appeared in Thai, English and Chinese. It shows that the language stability on the signs is uneven, which will result in foreign readers not being able to understand all the disaster evacuation routes. Therefore, those authorized to make signs should increase the number of languages on the signs to achieve more complete communication stability. As a result, foreign tourists can get the information about warnings, prohibitions and regulations in tourist attractions for their safety.

In addition, along Patong Beach, there were swimming instruction signs posted by Patong Municipality. The contents of the sign include flag symbols as follows: if lifeguards use a red flag, it means that the sea is dangerous, do not swim; the yellow flag means to swim carefully in the swimming area; and if the red and yellow flags are used together, it means there are lifeguards on duty and the swimming is required in the area between these two flags only. There is also explanation of the meaning of warning signs, including dangerous and strong currents, waves crashing on the beach, uneven surface seafloor, slippery rocks, deep water, and beware of jellyfish.

All information was explained in Thai, English, French, German, Russian, Korean, Chinese and Japanese. But from the data analysis, it was found that there were 16 languages that appeared in Patong Beach, which were assumed to be the mother tongues of foreign tourists. Therefore, Patong Municipality should add the information of Malaysian, Arabic, Hebrew, Italian, Danish, Spanish, Swedish and Burmese languages in order to be useful for giving advice on swimming for the safety of tourists as well.

### **2.5 Food stall signs**

Food stalls at Patong Beach were available both day and night, especially during the night time around 11.00-12.00 p.m. each day. Food stalls were mostly found at Bangla Walking Street. This area had a variety of nightlife venues for tourists. However, selling and consuming alcoholic beverages in these stores and restaurants were allowed no later than 12.00 p.m. according to the Center for the Situation Management of the Coronavirus Disease Outbreak by Ministry of Interior (2022).

Most of the food stalls did not have signs or menus in foreign languages. Many restaurants often list menus in Thai language. Although food stalls do not need shop signs to pay tax according to the Sign Tax Act No.2 B.E.2564, but if an entrepreneur adds a menu in a foreign language informing the price clearly and specify raw materials used in cooking, it may increase the value of selling by expanding the customer base from Thai people to more foreigners as Kallen (2009) said that the sign indicates the type of restaurant and the sign may be an invitation for the sign reader to become a customer.

### **2.6 Real estate signs**

Real estate sales in Phuket are growing steadily. Statistics on the value of ownership transfers of condominiums across Thailand to foreigners between January and June 2022, in descending order of the top five, found the highest value of ownership transfers to Chinese people amounting to 10,493 million baht, followed by American with 976 million baht, 933 million baht for French, 850 million baht for Russians, and 783 million baht for Cambodian. The provinces with the highest number of ownership transfers for foreigners were Bangkok with 15,079 million baht, 3,737 million baht in Chonburi, 1,365 million baht in Phuket, 921 million baht in Samut Prakan, and 512 million baht in Chiang Mai. It could be seen that Phuket was the third largest foreign ownership transfers in the country and had purchasing power from Chinese customers mainly. In the future, if the Chinese government opens up the country, the overall real estate trading volume in Phuket will increase (Real Estate Information Center, Government Housing Bank, 2022). In addition, foreign investment is the main mechanism that will make the country's economy develop sustainably (Sayfiddinovich, 2022).

Entrepreneurs are considered as the people who drive the economy and influence economic growth (Abduxalilovich, 2022). Patong Municipality has the local development policy of 2023-2027 on tourism and economic development plans, including the policy to promote the use of Financial Technology system in economic investment in Phuket, which encourage entrepreneurs to use Digital Banking system to facilitate tourists in accommodation and real estate business. In addition, there is a policy for Phuket to be the center of 'Work from Phuket' for inviting businessperson and tourists, both Thai and foreigners, to come and relax in the project "Work from Home at Phuket" by providing special discounts for tourists (Patong Municipality Office, 2021).

Therefore, real estate sale signs, in addition to providing product information in Thai, English, Russian and Chinese as in Figure 7, should be added by current technology via QR CODE so that



foreigners can easily scan to get more information or can communicate directly to the entrepreneurs. This will allow tourists to get details and contact at all times, which will lead to confidence in products and services, and decide to become a real estate customer later.



**Figure 7** Real Estate Sale Sign (Photo by the researcher)  
**English, Russian, Chinese:** “Property/ Investments”

So, if the entrepreneur adds the language according to the country of the customers, it will allow tourists to easily access information about goods and services. This will lead to an economic circulation in the area which has a positive effect on generating income for entrepreneurs. In addition, tourists are impressed that they receive information from public signs. Purchases of goods and services can be increased by obtaining sufficient information through accurate and multilingual signs.

In addition, personnel working in the tourism sector must be proficient in foreign languages and able to communicate effectively in order to successfully sell their products. Kallen (2009) stated that those working in the tourism industry are all recognize the language barrier. If tourists are unable to understand what a business has to offer, it will be difficult to sell products. If service providers make signs for tourists to have mutual understanding, the tourists will get more travel experiences and will make the tourism industry successful. In this regard, the development of language skills is consistent with the Royal Thai Government Gazette (2018) stipulating a 20-year national strategic plan between 2018 and 2037 that aims to develop and strengthen the potential of the Thai people in line with market demand and promotion of English language skills and a third language as well.

## Conclusions

Patong Beach has a wide variety of languages that are the mother tongues of most tourists, appearing in 16 languages: Thai, English, Chinese, Malaysian, Russian, Japanese, Korean, German, Arabic, Hebrew, French, Italian, Danish, Spanish, Swedish and Burmese. All languages are associated with the number of foreign tourists to Phuket according to THERABKK (2019) stating that the top 10 nationalities of tourists are Chinese, Russian, German, Australian, British, South Korean, Japanese, French, Swedish and Indian.

Each language is related to tourist cities in terms of providing important information as follows: (1) Thai serves as the national language and mainly communicates with Thai people; (2) English serves as information for foreign tourists who use English as the main language; (3) Chinese is found in real

estate, Chinese restaurants, and massage and spa parlors; (4) Russian is found in pharmacy, massage, and restaurant signs; (5) Arabic is found in halal food shop signs. In the municipality of Patong, 16% of the population is Muslim. It is noted that Arabic is the main language of Islam and always appears on restaurant signs along with Hebrew. Both languages were developed from the original Semitic languages belonging to the Afro-Asiatic family of languages. Hebrew is often used in Israel, which is the official language along with Arabic; (6) German, Italian, Swedish, Danish, French, Korean and Japanese are found on national restaurant signs and often have the national flag as a symbol; (7) Malay and Spanish are found at the Phuket Tourist Assistance Center. These two languages appear together with other languages as mentioned above; and (8) Burmese is found on the signs of prohibiting bird feeding along the beach. According to a non-participatory observation, it was found that customers tended to visit restaurants with their own language or national flag. In line with what Suaykratok and Manosuthikit (2019) said, finding a foreign language on a sign may help customers feel like they are abroad.

The aforementioned research results are therefore similar to previous research in the context of tourist cities and multilingual areas. Patong Beach represents a multilingual area related to the ethnicity and nationality of tourists. It is therefore an area of interaction between different linguistic communities and cultures, causing the ecology language to be transformed by foreign tourists. This also reflects that the linguistic landscape concept of Landry and Bourhis (1997) can be applied to research in the context of the tourist city of Patong Beach, which can be used for research in the context of a tourist city or other multilingual areas. The results are not different, which must analyze through both the appearance of the language and the relationship of the language in that context. In addition, the research results can be used to improve public signs for tourism in major tourist cities of Thailand as well.

As a result, this research provides a policy proposal to the government and business sectors to organize the appropriate public sign system in order to support Phuket with a database and be able to develop a public sign system for the completeness of providing information about goods and services to tourists. Those involved in creating the signs should specify the language on the main signs, additional signs, media and promotional products, as well as the symbols of that country as well, such as using the flag to indicate the nation, and Chinese, Malaysian, Russian, Japanese, Korean, German, Arabic, Hebrew, French, Italian, Danish, Spanish, Swedish and Burmese languages should be added based on the appropriate contexts according to market demand planning. Although English is an international language, but not every country can understand English. The language setting on the sign should therefore serve as a means of communication to express the feeling of the place towards visitors. Prasert & Zilli (2019) suggested that entrepreneurs can improve their products to accommodate new customers with a plan that meets the needs of the market by dividing tourists into two groups, such as the language of signs for food and beverages should be designed to attract short-term tourists, while the real estate and health signs should be designed and developed to attract long-term tourists.

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### **Author Contributions**

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **Ethical statement**

This research paper has never been published before and is currently not being considered for publication elsewhere. Additionally, this manuscript does not contain animal or human experimental designs or human-derived personal data. It has been validated by the Center for Human Research Ethics, Khon Kaen University.

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