



المشاهد اللغوية في المجتمع الكويتي: دراسة التنوع الثقافي في مدينة الكويت ومدينة السالمية

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ملخص

هدف الدراسة: تقدم هذه الدراسة رؤية عن وظائف ورموز العلامات اللغوية الظاهرة في المساحات العامة بمدينة الكويت ومدينة السالمية، وتستكشف كيفية انعكاس التنوع الثقافي للمجتمع الكويتي على المشاهد اللغوية في المدينتين. **المنهجية:** أعدت دراسة استقصائية بمواقع في كل مدينة لذلك الغرض في منتصف شهر سبتمبر/أيلول 2022، وقد أخذت هذه الدراسة بعين الاعتبار كيفية انتفاع المجموعات العرقية من أنظمة لغتهم وكتابتهم في العلامات والشعارات الموجودة على المباني في هذه المناطق، واستخدم برنامج الإحصاء للعلوم الاجتماعية SPSS وإحصاءات وصفية لتحليل تسجيل البيانات الناتجة. **النتائج:** تم تعرّف ما يزيد على مئتين وعشرين علامة، وكانت اللغتان السائدتان في الأماكن العامة في كلتا المدينتين هما العربية والإنجليزية، فيما كان للغة الهندية حضور بارز في حالة مدينة الكويت، أما في مدينة السالمية: فقد سُجل عدد قليل نسبياً من العلامات التي تنتمي للغة التغالوغ للفلبينيين. **الخلاصة:** هناك تمثيل مستفيض للتنوع الثقافي من خلال معدل ظهور أنظمة اللغات والكتابات في المشاهد اللغوية بمدينة الكويت ومدينة السالمية.

المصطلحات الرئيسية: المشهد اللغوي، التنوع الثقافي، مدينة الكويت، مدينة السالمية، المجتمع الكويتي.

The Linguistic Landscapes of Kuwaiti Society: A Study of Cultural Diversity in Kuwait City and Salmiya City

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Abstract

Objective: This empirical study explores how the cultural diversity of Kuwaiti society is reflected in the linguistic landscapes of Kuwait City and Salmiya City. **Methods:** Sites in each city were surveyed for this purpose in mid-September 2022. Signs were identified and recorded twice: once with a high-resolution digital camera and once with a handheld smartphone. The exact coordinates of the location of signs were recorded. The researcher then examined how different ethnic groups make use of their own language and writing systems in the signs in these areas. SPSS and descriptive statistics were used to analyse and report the data generated in this study. **Results:** Over two hundred and twenty unique signs were identified. While Arabic and English were the dominant languages in public spaces in both sites, Hindi featured quite prominently in the case of Kuwait City. In Old Salmiya, a relatively small number of signs containing Tagalog were recorded. **Conclusion:** Kuwait's cultural diversity is amply represented in the range of languages and writing systems found in the linguistic landscapes of Kuwait City and Salmiya City.

Keywords: Linguistic Landscape, Cultural Diversity, Kuwait City, Salmiya City, Kuwaiti Society.

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Research interests: Sociology of language, Language policy and reform, Linguistic landscapes.
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Introduction

The academic study of linguistic landscapes is a relatively new field of inquiry in social sciences. It is characterised by a “focus [...] on the representations of language(s) in the public space” (Van Mensel, Vandenbroucke, & Blackwood, 2017, p. 423). Though the earliest studies appeared in the 1970s (Rosenbaum et al., 1977; Tulp, 1978), serious inquiry in the field only began in the 2000s (Backhaus, 2007; Gorter, 2006a; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Linguistic landscape studies are of interest to sociologists, linguists, communication studies scholars, urban planning scholars, and architecture scholars. Such studies are also occasionally reported in the mainstream media in the Arab world (Al Sudani, 2016; Jermony, 2013). Gorter (2019) asserted that the study of linguistic landscapes often involves critical reflection on the “motives, uses, ideologies, language varieties and contestations” of languages (pp. 41–2).

Studies of linguistic landscapes have been conducted in cities and rural areas around the world. In Europe alone, for instance, there were studies of shop signs in Athens (Nikolaou, 2017), the use of regional and minority languages in northern Italy (Coluzzi, 2009), ideologies of multilingualism reflected in signs in Cyprus (Karpava, 2022), and contesting language ideologies in the linguistic landscape of the small tourist town of Dingle in Ireland (Moriarty, 2014). Furthermore, linguistic landscape studies were conducted in Malaysia (Abdul Manan et al, 2015; Woo & Riget, 2022), Hong Kong after its change in sovereignty (Lai, 2013), Costa Rica (Buckingham, 2019), Lebanon (Karam et al., 2020), and a host of other countries (Costley et al., 2022; Kroon, 2021; Liao & Chan, 2022). To date, and to the best of our knowledge, no research studies have been conducted on the linguistic landscapes of Kuwaiti society.

The State of Kuwait is a multicultural and ethnically diverse country composed of numerous nationalities; according to migration statistics collected in 2021, the most widespread groups residing in Kuwait are “non-Arab Asians” (over 1.5 million people) and “[non-Kuwaiti] Arabs” (905,736 people) (Central Statistical Bureau, 2021a). Residents categorised as “non-Arab Asians” include Filipinos, Indians, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, Nepalis, and other residents of South and Southeast Asian origin. This group is particularly dominant in Kuwaiti society, currently representing over 60% of foreign residents and over a third of the entire

population of the State of Kuwait (Central Statistical Bureau, 2021b). While a variety of languages are spoken by residents originating from South and Southeast Asian countries, the main languages heard include Hindi, Tagalog, Tamil, and Urdu.

The State of Kuwait has been home to millions of foreign residents for several decades. This means that Kuwaiti society itself is now composed of individuals of a wide range of cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and mother tongues. Tracking the impact that such diversity has on public spaces across Kuwait is important, because it provides future generations with a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Kuwaiti society and how it may change in the future.

The theory underpinning this study, along the lines of previous linguistic landscape studies (e.g. Karpava, 2022), is the symbolic construction of public space. That is, individuals and groups from various segments of society negotiate the arrangement of public space through the inclusion/exclusion of visible language. The linguistic landscape, therefore, is a manifestation of the ongoing construction of public space through the use of symbols (language).

This empirical study employs descriptive statistics to report on the cultural diversity found in the linguistic landscape of two sites (Kuwait City and Salmiya City) in Kuwait. SPSS was used to analyse the data gathered through visits to the two sites during September 2022.

Literature Review

The sociological significance of linguistic landscape research was highlighted by Gorter (2006b), who described the study of linguistic landscapes as a “new approach to multilingualism” in society (p. 1). This new approach included a careful analysis of public space (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009), government policy, and cultural diversity. It connects the use of languages among individuals to a broader realm of socialisation and policy formulation impacting the public sphere.

Despite the growth of linguistic landscape studies, only few Arabic-language studies describe the linguistic landscapes of Arab societies. Even academic books and dissertations published on Arabic sociolinguistics fail to incorporate or reflect on the relationship between visible language usage in public spaces and sociocultural diversity (e.g. Albirini, 2015). Similarly, Al-Dashti (1998) explored the linguistic choices that members of Kuwaiti

society made but neglected the overarching sociological relevance of public space in the context of language choices. English-language scholarship contains numerous examples of linguistic landscape studies in Arab societies, several of which featured in the *Journal of Linguistic Landscape* (Moustaoui, 2019; Raish, 2019).

Amara (2019) investigated the symbolic use of Arabic by Arab Palestinians living in Israel. He described the relationship between Arab-Palestinian identity and the linguistic landscape in various localities in Israel. Amara (2019) also explored how globalisation impacted the linguistic landscape through processes such as cultural erosion.

Most linguistic landscape studies of cities and countries in the Gulf region and the Arab world are published in English-language journals and dissertations. A study by Alomoush (2015), conducted in 2012, examined the linguistic landscapes of six Jordanian cities. The study found that most signs ($n = 4,070$) were multilingual, with a significant minority of monolingual signs ($n = 3,967$). Arabic and English were dominant in the linguistic landscape of Jordanian cities. Alomoush (2015) also found that minority languages like Chechen and Armenian were not widely represented in the linguistic landscape because the minority groups themselves did not perceive them “as instrumental as Arabic and English” (p. 224).

Al-Athwary (2017) touched upon the globalisation impact on the city of Sana’a in Yemen, and how a relatively monolingual population used a mixture of Arabic and English on signs throughout the city. Al-Athwary (2017) described Sana’a as a city where Arabic appeared on most signs, but concluded that public space in Yemen was “much more multilingual than one may expect” (p. 161). Through existing planning policies, local authorities in Sana’a City do not tolerate the use of a range of languages in the linguistic landscape.

Alotaibi and Alamri (2022) investigated how language policies in Saudi Arabia affected the linguistic landscape of Riyadh and Jeddah. The aim of their study was to explore the use of Arabic and English on commercial shopping signs to make remedial suggestions. They found that closer government guidance was needed to ensure that multilingual signs convey information as accurately as possible. In an earlier study of the linguistic landscape of Riyadh, Aldholmi (2010) found that the use of English in the city was closely connected to perceptions of English as a globally influential language.

There were also several studies of the linguistic landscape in Oman (Buckingham, 2015a; Buckingham, 2015b; Buckingham & Al-Athwary, 2017; Jamoussi & Roche, 2017). Jamoussi and Roche (2017) explored the variation of Arabic and English usage on road signs heading from Muscat to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. Their study found inconsistencies in the ways in which English and Arabic were used on signs in the Sultanate of Oman. In the case of Buckingham (2015a), a nationwide survey of signs in Oman was used to analyse the use of variants of English in Omani society. The study found that Arabic and South Asian English both influenced the content used in signs in the Omani society. The present study builds on the findings of Buckingham (2015b), which deals with English as a *lingua franca* that facilitates communication as a *de facto* second language used by both Omanis and expatriates. Finally, researchers also conducted a comparative study on the use of language in public spaces in Oman and Yemen (see Buckingham & Al-Athwary, 2017).

Though relatively sparse, the Arabic language scholarship on linguistic landscapes is insightful and of high quality. For instance, Ali (2022) presented a detailed and carefully crafted study of Batha, a multilingual urban locality in Riyadh City. Another example of an outstanding work of scholarship was Al Mobshir (2020), who analysed the impact that the linguistic landscape around Islamic schools had on Arabic language learning and acquisition. Al Mobshir (2020) argued that the languages present in the linguistic landscape had a significant effect in terms of exposing individuals to languages used in schooling. Lastly, Qarqor (2018) presented a comprehensive study of Algerian language policy and its potential impact on the linguistic landscape of Algeria.

Scholars have produced detailed studies of linguistic landscapes in societies around the world. In a study of the diversity in the linguistic landscape of metropolitan Tokyo, Backhaus (2006) found that approximately 7% of signs surveyed included languages other than Japanese or English. This was significant, given the relatively low numbers of foreign residents in Tokyo at the time of the survey.

In her description of a study of the linguistic landscape in Vienna, Soukoup (2020) explained how an interplay existed between the linguistic landscape and the members of society frequenting those areas. The relationship between the two is dialogical and reflects the way in which

meaning making is “situational” and dependent on “authors [who] put forth, and readers [who] infer, messages shaped [...] by the featured language choice” (Soukoup, 2020, p. 73). The visibility of language in a public space, therefore, reflects the relationships that exist between the different members of society and the spaces they occupy. This visibility can also be influenced by events that precipitate significant social change, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The relationship between social change and linguistic landscapes was eloquently described in a study of coronavirus signage in Abu Dhabi (Hopkins & van den Hoven, 2022).

Methodology

The sites selected for survey purposes were clearly delineated prior to investigation. For replication purposes, plus code coordinates were provided and maps were included for both sites. Signage under consideration included any languages clearly displayed on the façade of storefronts, buildings, and other stationary objects (such as poles and slabs). Graffiti (if any) was excluded due to its relatively unstable and impermanent characteristics. This paper, therefore, follows Backhaus (2007) and considers only stationary signs fixed to carriers for survey purposes.

Two sites were chosen for this study; the first site was an area in Salhiya near what is commonly known as the Sheraton Roundabout (Site A), in the heart of Kuwait City, while the second site was Old Salmiya (Site B), a redeveloped district of Salmiya City. The choice of these two sites was motivated by, in the case of Site A, proximity to a public transportation hub and heavy foot traffic and, in the case of Site B, business activity and residential buildings. Site A and Site B are pictured in the Figures 1 and 2 below. The area within the blue boundaries indicates the survey sites.

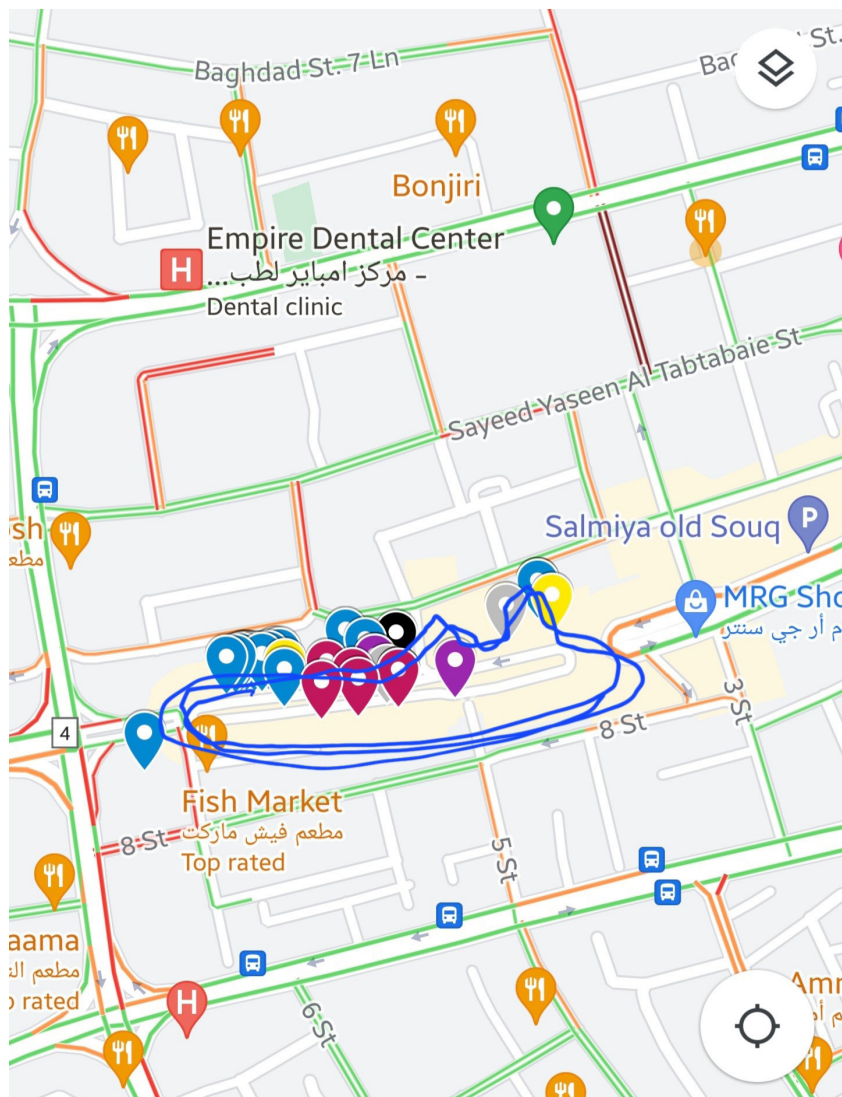
Figure 1

Site A: Area near Sheraton Roundabout



Figure 2

Site B: Old Salmiya Shopping District



In terms of surveying, images of each identified sign were recorded twice: once with a high-resolution digital camera and once with a handheld smartphone. A digital camera was used to capture high quality images that may be used for presentation purposes. A smartphone was used to record both the image and the exact coordinates of the location where the

signs were recorded. The GPS Map Camera application, a freely available application, was used for this purpose on a smartphone running an Android operating system.

Once the images of the signs were captured, they were collated and coded according to language(s), colour, placement, and location. Once coded, the signs were then plotted on digital maps according to language(s) used and exact location (using the plus code coordinates previously obtained during the survey process); an example of this can be seen in Figure 2. Plus, code coordinates were used because they were easier to process and record than conventional GPS coordinates, which were longer and occasionally less concise.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data generated during the surveys. This involved calculating the percentage of language variety in public space in the chosen sites and evaluating the presence of mono- or multilingualism in them. SPSS was used to analyse the data and present the findings in the tables featured in the Results section.

Results

A sample of 228 images were captured. In the survey of Site A, a total of 90 unique signs were catalogued, while in the survey of Site B, 138 unique signs were catalogued.

A breakdown of the languages used in signs in Site A can be found below in Table 1. The most widely used languages on the signs in Site A were Arabic (68.8%), followed by English (52.5%). However, more than one in five signs also featured Hindi. Several signs used Hindi exclusively (see Figure 3), while most signs featuring Hindi appeared alongside the other more prominent languages, namely Arabic and English (see Figure 4). An outlier was Amharic (a language of Ethiopia), which featured on a sign belonging to the offices of the national airline of Ethiopia.

Table 1

Distribution of Languages on Signs at Site A (n = 90)

		Arabic	English	Hindi	Tagalog	Amharic	Other
Site A	Count	62	47	21	0	1	0
	Percentage	68.8%	52.2%	23.3%	-	1%	-

Figure 3

Shop Sign Entirely in Mayalam (Indian language, plus code coordinates 9X67+WW Kuwait City)



Source: author

Figure 4

Shop Sign in a Mixture of Arabic, English, and Hindi (plus code coordinates 9X68+V2 Kuwait City)



Source: author

The salient use of Hindi, including the exclusive use of Hindi, on signs indicates that Site A is frequented by Hindi-speaking residents of South Asian origin. This was corroborated by observations at the time of the survey; most individuals at Site A were of Indian and South Asian origin. The area itself, near a high-end shopping mall, contained numerous eateries, grocery stores, barbershops, and mobile phone stores catering for residents of South Asian origin. Through the clear use of symbols (language) belonging to these groups, the area, therefore, can adequately be described as trilingual: Arabic, English, and Hindi.

A breakdown of the languages used in Site B can be found below in Table 2. No Hindi signs were found in Site B. However, a similar mixture of Arabic (74.6%) and English (73.1%) dominated the linguistic landscape of Old Salmiya. A notable though less prominent language found on signs in Site B was Tagalog (6.5%), one of the official languages of the Philippines (Belvez, n. d.). Tagalog typically appeared on signs belonging to eateries (e.g. Figure 5), indicating that the symbolic construction of public space was also taking place in Site B. However, Tagalog was also found in commissioned graffiti art in the area, but this was outside of the scope of this paper.

Table 2
Distribution of Languages on Signs at Site B (n = 138)

		Arabic	English	Hindi	Tagalog	Amharic	Other
Site B	Count	103	101	0	9	0	0
	Percentage	74.6%	73.1%	-	6.5%	-	-

Figure 5

Shop Sign Entirely in Tagalog in Old Salmiya (plus code coordinates 83M4+6HP, Salmiya, Kuwait)



Source: author

The use of Tagalog in Old Salmiya indicates that Filipinos regularly frequent the area. This is corroborated by a newspaper article describing Old Salmiya as a Filipino enclave (Garcia, 2021). Observations at the time of research also indicated many Filipinos at Site B. The visibility of Tagalog in the linguistic landscape of Site B demonstrates how a recently renovated commercial and residential district can represent the cultural diversity found in the area. While Site A is described as trilingual, it is somewhat harder to classify Site B as trilingual, since Tagalog is much less represented in the linguistic landscape. Site B is predominantly bilingual (Arabic and English) with some Filipino characteristics.

Discussion

This study of the linguistic landscape of Kuwaiti society confirms the existence of cultural diversity in Kuwait City and Salmiya City. It also provides insight into the distribution of foreign residents in Kuwait, including the economic and cultural pastimes of such individuals. It offers a picture of the contemporary realities of Kuwaiti public spaces. Although Arabic and English are dominant in signs (much as they are in countries

like Jordan), other languages also feature regularly in public spaces. Public spaces in Kuwait reflect the cultural diversity of Kuwaiti society through the South Asian and Southeast Asian languages used on signs belonging to a variety of different establishments. This indicates that various segments of society (e.g. the local authorities, residents, private organisations) actively or passively support the use of languages other than Arabic and English in public spaces in Kuwait. Unlike the situation in Jordanian cities (Alomoush, 2015), minority languages in Kuwaiti society are relatively well-represented in urban areas and, therefore, at least implicitly supported by most social actors.

This study demonstrates how cultural diversity is well-represented in the linguistic landscapes of both Kuwait City and Salmiya City, albeit with differences in the actual languages that feature on signs and the degree of representation in terms of linguistic diversity. In the case of Kuwait City, the Hindi language of Indian residents is salient. In Salmiya City, Tagalog (the language of Filipino residents) is only somewhat present in the linguistic landscape and does not compare with the higher rate of representation of Hindi in Kuwait City, which is considered, according to this study, as an example of a trilingual linguistic landscape. One reason for the lack of Tagalog in the linguistic landscape may be the relatively recent relocation of Filipino residents to Old Salmiya, which began in 2019. Prior to this, most Filipino residents in the State of Kuwait frequented areas in Kuwait City itself to socialise and shop.

Another reason that may explain why Tagalog was less prevalent in Site B than Hindi in Site A could be related to the fact that the English language is considered one of the official languages spoken in the Philippines (Belvez, n. d.). By contrast India, and other South Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, do not legally recognise English as an official language, despite the fact that it is widely studied, spoken, and associated with ruling elites (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, n. d.). With time, the prevalence of Tagalog in Old Salmiya may change – either increasing or decreasing – depending on the uses of the area and the continued influx of Filipino residents into Old Salmiya.

Conclusion

As opposed to the globalisation of society reflected in the linguistic landscapes of other countries in the region (e.g. Yemen, according to Al-

Athwary, 2017), the appearance of Hindi and Tagalog in Kuwaiti society are examples of cultural diversity. This is also a clear example of how public spaces are symbolically constructed. The signs displayed in the two sites investigated in this empirical study were targeted at and viewed by Hindi and Tagalog speakers respectively, as opposed to a broader and more “global” audience of consumers. They indicate that Kuwaiti society is not a monolingual nor a bilingual society of Arabic and global English, but that it is a heterogenous mixture comprising at least four different languages: Arabic, English, Hindi, and Tagalog. The symbolic construction of public space detailed in this paper, therefore, has implications for the future planning and design of these and other sites in Kuwaiti society. As shown in Aelbrecht et al. (2022), the planning and design of public space have the potential to play an important role in the promotion of social cohesion.

Linguistic landscape studies make an important contribution to scholarship on Kuwaiti society and social issues due to the rich descriptions of public spaces they offer. These descriptions are often accompanied by a detailed rationale of the cultural and ethnic composition of society, in addition to reflections on the social change occurring within an area. The studies touch on the sociocultural, economic, and political motivations involved in the development and shaping of public spaces. While Kuwaiti society can be sufficiently described as globalised through its use of a combination of Arabic and English in its linguistic landscapes, minority languages also regularly feature in public spaces due to patterns of migration and habitation. The fact that minority languages feature in the linguistic landscape of Kuwait indicates that they are at least implicitly supported by key stakeholders (e.g. local residents, business owners, the authorities), meaning that the ideology of multiculturalism is a feature of the sites investigated in this study.

Future studies could compare the linguistic landscapes of different Gulf countries (e.g. Kuwait and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates) to create a clearer picture of the ways in which cultural diversity and global languages like English are represented in the linguistic landscape. For instance, a study of Souk Naif in Dubai demonstrates how minority languages, including those spoken by South Asians, are neglected or actively erased from public space (Karolak, 2022). Similarly, areas within and beyond Kuwait City and Salmiya City (e.g. Al-Mirqab and Fahaheel City) should be investigated to further understand the similarities

and differences in the linguistic landscapes of Kuwaiti society. This study merely intends to initiate a conversation concerning the linguistic landscape of Kuwaiti and other societies in the Gulf region. Lastly, future studies could also focus on the intersection between multilingualism and social class as represented in linguistic landscapes (e.g. Lu et al., 2022).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mona Cahusac de Caux for assisting me with the surveys conducted in Kuwait City and Salmiya City.

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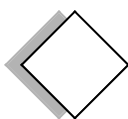
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للاستشهاد:

دي كو، باسل. (2025). المشاهد اللغوية في المجتمع الكويتي: دراسة التنوع الثقافي في مدينة الكويت ومدينة السالمية، 53(1)، 267-288.

To Cite:

de Caux, Basil. (2025). The linguistic landscapes of kuwaiti society: A study of cultural diversity in Kuwait City and Salmiya City. *Journal of the Social Sciences*, 53(1), 267-288.

