

# Negotiating Identity Through Culinary Signage: A Linguistic Landscape Study in Hail, Saudi Arabia

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**Abstract**—This study explores the linguistic landscape (LL) of culinary signage in Hail, Saudi Arabia, focusing on how language and visual semiotics construct identity and mediate local–global dynamics. Drawing on 332 storefront signs analysed through both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study identifies three dominant identity orientations: local Saudi, pan-Arab, and global cosmopolitan. These identities emerge through strategic language choices (Arabic, English, and others) and multimodal elements such as imagery, colour, and typography. While Arabic remains dominant, the growing presence of English and hybrid forms reflects increasing linguistic flexibility among businesses targeting youth and international consumers. Culinary signage in Hail operates as more than functional communication; it embodies sociolinguistic transformation and contributes to the visible negotiation of cultural identity in public space. Situating the Saudi context within broader linguistic landscape scholarship, the study underscores the need for multimodal, regionally diverse, and context-sensitive analyses of language use in commercial environments.

**Index Terms**—linguistic landscape, culinary, identity, multilingualism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Culinary establishments offer a valuable lens for examining the interplay of language, culture, and identity in contemporary urban settings (Liu, 2025). Restaurants, cafes, and bakeries are not only places of consumption but also semiotic spaces where language and visual symbols reflect cultural affiliations, commercial aspirations, and broader social transformations (Hazaea & Qassem, 2025). As visible components of the linguistic landscape (LL), culinary signboards provide insight into how local, regional, and global identities are negotiated in public space.

In Saudi Arabia, these dynamics gain significance amid Vision 2030—an ambitious national plan to diversify the economy, enhance quality of life, and preserve cultural heritage (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). Vision 2030 understands the importance of building a strong, fulfilling society as the foundation for sustainable prosperity. It emphasises preserving Saudi identity and heritage while simultaneously promoting economic diversification and global integration (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). This multidimensional agenda situates the public linguistic landscape—culinary signage included—at the heart of debates around national identity, modernization, and global cultural flows. Culinary signage thus emerges as a key medium through which local traditions and global consumer culture interact (Hazaea & Qassem, 2025). This study examines the languages, scripts, and semiotic strategies used in Hail City’s storefronts to explore how signage contributes to constructing local Saudi identity.

Located in northern Saudi Arabia, Hail is known for its rich cultural heritage and strong regional identity, shaped by figures like the poet Hatem al-Ta’i and Bedouin traditions (Noaime et al., 2022). Its heritage, which dates back to the pre-Islamic period, has shaped Hail’s reputation as one of Saudi Arabia’s notable cultural and tourist centres (Noaime et al., 2022). In the first half of 2024 alone, over 1.1 million tourists visited the region, underscoring its growing appeal to visitors (Saudi Press Agency, 2025). This rise in tourism has paralleled the growth of Hail’s culinary sector, making signage a key site where local identity and global influence converge. By analysing these signboards, this study explores how Hail’s regional character is expressed, adapted, and negotiated through public signage. Culinary signboards serve as a microcosm of the broader transformations under Vision 2030, offering a rich site for investigating how identity is constructed at the intersection of local belonging, regional pride, and global aspirations.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. LL Research: Origins and Developments

The field of LL research emerged at the intersection of sociolinguistics, semiotics, and discourse analysis, with an emphasis on the visibility of language in public spaces. Landry and Bourhis (1997, p. 23) define the LL as “the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region,” showing that signage both reflects and shapes language vitality and identity boundaries. They argue that exposure to public signage can influence language attitudes and behaviour, reinforcing in-group and out-group distinctions.

Scollon and Scollon-Wong (2003) extended this perspective through their concept of geosemiotics, which examines how signs derive meaning from their placement in social and physical space. They emphasise that interpretation must include not only linguistic content but also spatial, cultural, and material context. For example, the use of English on a sign in a non-English-speaking region may signal cosmopolitan appeal rather than linguistic function. Their contribution highlighted the interdisciplinary nature of LL research, linking language, space, and cultural symbolism in ways that continue to inform contemporary analyses.

A major methodological advance came from Backhaus (2006), whose large-scale study analysed 11,834 signs in Tokyo. He introduced systematic coding of language number, order, size, and script. By distinguishing official (government) from non-official (private) signs, Backhaus revealed how policy and practice interact in public space, highlighting power, multilingual realities, and sociopolitical tensions. His later works (Backhaus, 2008, 2009) mapped urban multilingualism and examined how signage regulations are negotiated or resisted, combining micro-level textual analysis with macro-level sociopolitical frameworks. This approach remains foundational for both quantitative and interpretive LL studies.

Alongside methodological advances, scholars have also highlighted ideological dimensions. Ben-Rafael et al. (2006), made a seminal contribution to the field of linguistic landscape studies by foregrounding the complex interplay between language, ideology, and identity in public signage. Drawing on data from multilingual cities like Jerusalem, their work emphasised how signs serve not only communicative purposes but also symbolic and ideological functions, reflecting power relations, community boundaries, and sociopolitical tensions. By introducing a sociological lens, they positioned LL as a rich field spanning sociolinguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies.

Over the past two decades, LL research has flourished globally, covering contexts from postcolonial African cities (Lanza & Woldemariam, 2014) to Southeast Asian metropolises (Coluzzi, 2016)—demonstrating how public signage mediates identity, power, and globalisation. Methodologies have expanded beyond documentation to include ethnographic, multimodal, and critical discourse approaches, interrogating how public signage mediates identity, power, and globalisation (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

### *B. Language and Identity in the LL*

Language visibility in public space is more than communicative—it plays a crucial role in constructing and negotiating identity. Gorter and Cenoz (2024) argue that the linguistic landscape reflects cultural values, social hierarchies, and power relations, offering insight into how space is symbolically organised. Public signage thus becomes a site where social groups assert presence, signal affiliations, and position themselves within broader sociopolitical structures.

This relationship between language and identity has been explored in diverse multilingual contexts. Shohamy (2006), for example, emphasises the ideological nature of public signage, noting that language choices are often governed by underlying power dynamics, policies, and identity politics. In multilingual settings, the selection, omission, or hierarchy of languages on signage can index dominance, resistance, inclusion, or marginalization. Similarly, Blommaert (2013) argues that language in the public space must be read not only in terms of linguistic content but also in relation to who controls the space, whose voice is legitimized, and which identities are being projected or suppressed.

Adding to this perspective, Leeman and Modan (2009) argue that LLs are sites where material and symbolic aspects of identity intersect, revealing underlying tensions between commodification, authenticity, and spatial control. Their study of Chinatown in Washington, D.C., reveals that Chinese script is often used less for communication and more as a visual aesthetic aligned with urban branding. Such examples illustrate how language choices in signage shape imagined cultural alignments and serve strategic purposes—whether signalling authenticity, appealing to tourists, or differentiating a brand (Benu et al., 2025). Signage thus becomes both reflective and performative of identity.

Within today's global signage economy, English carries symbolic capital that extends beyond native-speaking contexts. It is often mobilised as an economic resource and marker of modernity, even where its functional use is minimal (Li, 2015; Nenotek et al., 2025; Vivas-Peraza, 2020). This instrumental use of language reflects a broader logic of visibility, where the presence of global languages—particularly English—signals modernity, sophistication, and cultural capital, even in the absence of functional necessity (Li, 2015; Vivas-Peraza, 2020). This symbolic use aligns with broader visibility strategies, where global languages signal sophistication and international relevance.

These dynamics are especially evident in transitional contexts like Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030. As the Kingdom navigates heritage and globalisation, signage reflects broader identity negotiations. LL research in such settings provides critical insights into how linguistic choices mediate between tradition and modernity, and between local rootedness and global orientation.

### *C. Culinary LL in Global Contexts*

The culinary sector has become a compelling focus in LL research, offering insights into how food-related signage reflects identity, globalisation, and sociocultural negotiation. Liu (2025) explores how signage at a Cantonese restaurant navigates tensions between heritage expression and commercial appeal. The restaurant's signboard incorporates Cantonese script, English labels, and culturally evocative visual motifs to create a hybrid identity that addresses both local Chinese diaspora customers and a wider non-Chinese audiences. Similarly, Yuan (2024) highlights how coffee shop signage in Shantou used multilingual and multimodal features during Chinese New Year to reimagine the festival in youthful, international terms.

Benu et al. (2025) report a comparable pattern in Kupang City, Indonesia, where culinary signage incorporates both Indonesian and foreign languages, reflecting pluralistic identity and global openness. Here, signage serves not only commercial goals but also cultural preservation. In Bali's Ubud region, Artawa et al. (2023) observe that restaurant signs often pair English with Balinese and Indonesian. English dominates the communicative function, while local languages reinforce cultural presence—offering a balance between global appeal and linguistic rootedness.

Beyond exterior signage, interior semiotics contribute to cosmopolitan identity. Abas (2019), in her geosemiotic analysis of ethnic restaurants in Bloomington, Indiana, highlights how menus, decor, and staff–customer interactions construct transnational foodscapes. These elements go beyond aesthetics, performing cultural negotiations that bridge local authenticity and global modernity. Blommaert and Maly (2016) add a technological dimension by analysing how a small online delivery sticker at a Bulgarian restaurant indexed participation in digital infrastructures. Such minor elements reveal how signage adapts to evolving norms of convenience and connectivity, signalling modern consumer alignment.

Collectively, these studies underscore that culinary signage is not just a promotional tool, but a semiotic resource for negotiating identity, heritage, and market positioning. Through scripts, visuals, and digital markers, culinary LLs reflect efforts to blend tradition with innovation, local belonging with global visibility.

#### *D. Culinary LL in the Arab and Saudi Context*

Research on culinary linguistic landscapes in the Arab world is still emerging, though recent studies highlight how signage negotiates identity amid tensions between Arabisation policies and the growing presence of English (Al-Athwary, 2022; Alotaibi & Alamri, 2022). In Oman, Buckingham (2015) found that while Arabic ensures local legitimacy, English is often used to convey modernity and international appeal—demonstrating how signage serves not only communicative but also symbolic functions. Karam et al. (2020) examined private storefronts in Beirut. They showed that the spatial distribution of scripts—sometimes excluding Arabic or Armenian—reflects processes of urban redevelopment and cultural negotiation. Here, signage becomes a tool for visually scripting urban identity under globalising pressures.

In Saudi Arabia, empirical research on culinary signage remains limited. Hazaea and Qassem (2025) examined 88 coffee shop signs between Najran and Mecca, identifying branding discourses (Arabic local, English global, and bilingual glocal) that reflect tensions between national identity and global consumerism. Strategic use of transliteration (e.g., kufi) emerged as a hybrid practice aligning cultural values with branding goals. Another study by Hazaea et al. (2024) in Abha assessed critical examination of whether outdoor restaurant signs accurately reflect menu content. The researchers whether restaurant signage aligned with menu language. While bilingual Arabic–English signage was common, internal menus often lacked linguistic diversity, revealing a symbolic use of multilingual signage more than practical communication.

Despite these insights, Saudi-focused studies remain narrow in scope—often centred on specific sectors (e.g., coffee shops) or issues (e.g., signage–menu mismatches), with less attention to the broader semiotic dimensions of storefront design. The visual, spatial, and multimodal strategies that shape branding and identity remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates a diverse sample of culinary signage across Hail City to understand how language and semiotics reflect identity construction and global–local negotiation. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What languages and scripts are used on culinary storefront signs in Hail City?
2. How do these multilingual patterns reflect or construct ethnic, cultural, or national identities?

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### *A. Theoretical Framework*

This study is informed by key perspectives in LL research that highlight the interconnections between language, space, and identity (Gorter, 2013; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). The linguistic landscape is viewed not simply as a reflection of language use but as a semiotic and ideological space where identities and sociocultural meanings are negotiated. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of language as symbolic capital, the study recognises that choices in script, language, and naming convey indexical meanings—such as prestige, authenticity, or local rootedness. These signs help construct imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), where a shared sense of belonging is created through public symbols, even among individuals who never meet.

This study approaches the linguistic landscape as a dynamic semiotic space where language, typography, and design function not merely as conveyors of information, but as tools for constructing identity and signalling cultural values (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). Culinary signage in Hail is understood within this dynamic, where global consumer aesthetics and local cultural references intersect. Framing the study within sociolinguistics, semiotics, and discourse analysis allows for an exploration of how visual and textual choices in signage function as everyday identity work in public space.

#### *B. Data Collection*

This study focused on outdoor commercial signage from restaurants, cafés, bakeries, and other food-related businesses in Hail. These signs offer a valuable lens for examining language use, cultural affiliation, and identity construction in

public space. A purposive sampling strategy was used to capture geographic diversity, business types, and linguistic variation. A total of 332 signs were collected for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Photographic documentation was the primary method. Fieldwork took place between November 2024 and July 2025 across key commercial zones, including major streets, shopping areas, and food plazas. The focus was on permanent storefront signage; however, some temporary signs—such as banners for upcoming openings—were included when they provided relevant linguistic content. Promotional materials, menu boards, and mobile ads were excluded. Photos captured full signage context, including brand names, script types, typographic features, and visual symbols. All signs were publicly visible and photographed without entering private property, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for visual data collection.

### C. Coding and Analytical Procedures

This study followed a structured coding approach informed by established LL methodologies, particularly Backhaus (2007) and Cenoz and Gorter (2006). The goal was to categorise signage data based on language use, visual features, and identity markers. Adopting Backhaus's (2007, p. 66) definition, a sign was defined as "any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame," including brand names, slogans, or descriptors on a storefront. In line with Cenoz and Gorter (2006), each culinary establishment was treated as one unit of analysis, even when multiple texts or panels were present, to reflect business-level branding strategies.

The analysis proceeded through a two-tiered process that integrated both quantitative coding and qualitative interpretation. Each sign was manually examined and coded for language presence—Arabic, English, or other foreign languages—based on script, phrasing, and lexical content. Signs were classified as monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual based on language origin, not script. For example, a sign written entirely in Arabic script could still be classified as multilingual if it contained transliterated elements from different languages. This follows Backhaus's (2007) framework and enabled a nuanced structural view of linguistic diversity. Semantic domains were also identified—local, religious, regional, global, or hybrid—along with visual elements such as colour, typography, and icons, treated as meaningful semiotic resources aligned with language choice. Brand names and lexical items were preserved in their original form and enclosed in single quotation marks (e.g., 'رواية'), with transliterations in parentheses (e.g., Rewaiah) to assist English readers without altering script authenticity.

## IV. RESULTS

### A. Patterns of Monolingual and Multilingual Signages

This section addresses the research question concerning what languages and scripts are used on culinary storefront signs in Hail. It examines how languages are used—either individually or in combination—on culinary signs in Hail. As shown in Table 1, monolingual signs are the most common (67.77%), followed by bilingual signs (28.01%) and multilingual signs (4.21%).

TABLE 1  
LANGUAGE COMBINATIONS ON CULINARY SIGNAGE IN HAIL CITY

Language combination	Number of storefronts	Percentage
Monolinguals		
Arabic only	129	38.85 %
English only	78	23.49 %
Other monolingual foreign languages	18	5.42 %
Total of monolinguals	225	67.77%
Bilinguals		
Arabic + English	67	20.18 %
English + other foreign languages	13	3.91 %
Arabic + foreign languages other than English	12	3.61 %
Chinese + Korean	1	0.30 %
Total of bilinguals	93	28.01%
Multilinguals		
Arabic + English + another foreign language	14	4.21%
Total (all signage types)	332	100 %

Among monolingual signs, Arabic-only signage is the most prevalent (38.85%), reflecting a strong local linguistic orientation and cultural centrality (see Figure 1). English-only signs (23.49%) are also common which indicates the significant role of English as a global language, particularly in branding and consumer appeal (see Figure 2). A smaller portion (5.42%,) of signage uses other foreign languages monolingually, such as Italian, Indian, Turkish, or East Asian languages. For example, the Indian restaurant 'راجو' (Raju) uses an Indian name rendered in Arabic script. Another instance is 'Sparita' 'سباريتا', an Italian name presented in both Latin and Arabic scripts, meaning 'disappeared'. These names index the identity of the culinary establishments, where the use of the Indian or Italian elements reinforces the authenticity of the culinary experience. These examples illustrate how foreign linguistic resources can appear as stand-alone identifiers. Although rendered in Arabic script, these signs remain monolingual, as they do not include any accompanying translation or parallel language. Their function is purely nominal, signalling brand identity without

engaging in bilingual or multilingual communication. Such names are typically associated with ethnically themed culinary venues and serve to construct a cultural or exotic identity.



Figure 1. Samples of Arabic Use on the Name Boards



Figure 2. Samples of English Use on the Name Boards

Bilingual signage constitutes over a quarter of the dataset (28.01%). The most frequent pairing involves Arabic and English, which appear together on 20.18% of the signs. For instance, the restaurant 'B1' combines its English brand name with the Arabic slogan 'برجر ناكله...وبرجر ياكلك!!!' (A burger, you eat...and a burger that eats you), as illustrated in Figure 3. This pairing reflects a hybrid communicative strategy that accommodates both local and international audiences — a pattern often observed in commercial signage in urban multilingual contexts. Other bilingual combinations include English and other foreign languages (3.91%), as in 'ToTikka,' which combines English branding with the South Asian culinary term tikka. Arabic and foreign languages other than English are also represented in 3.61% of the dataset, as in 'شاورما اسكندر' (Iskandar Shawarma). This name combines the Arabic culinary term shawarma with Iskandar, derived from the Turkish dish iskander kebab. Although it appears monolingual in Arabic script, it actually incorporates a Turkish-origin culinary term, demonstrating that bilingualism is not always tied to different scripts but can also occur within a single script through the borrowing of lexical items. Such choices may be used by owners to evoke culinary authenticity and cultural prestige, associating their business with the well-known Turkish dish iskander kebab while ensuring accessibility for an Arabic-reading audience. In addition, there is a single case (0.30%) of Chinese and Korean, a rare East Asian pairing without the inclusion of Arabic or English. Overall, while Arabic–English pairings dominate bilingual signage, other combinations — including English with South Asian terms, Arabic with Turkish references, and the single Chinese–Korean case — remain relatively rare, collectively reflecting selective strategies to target specific linguistic groups and cultural niches.



Figure 3. The use of English and Arabic

Multilingual signage — combining Arabic, English, and another foreign language — is the least common, accounting for just 4.21% of the sample. These signs reflect globalised branding and a cosmopolitan ethos. As illustrated in Figure 4, one example combines English, Arabic, and the Japanese-origin word *sushi* (rendered in both Latin and Arabic scripts), producing a layered linguistic display that enhances accessibility while indexing culinary authenticity. Though limited in number, such signs point to a selective use of multilingualism to convey identity and inclusivity.

Overall, while Arabic remains dominant, the presence of English and other languages — especially in combination — highlights the growing multilingual character of Hail's commercial signage. These patterns suggest a clear hierarchy: Arabic serves as the primary linguistic resource, while English and other foreign languages are selectively employed to add global prestige, signal culinary authenticity, or target niche audiences. The limited frequency of such combinations underscores that multilingualism, while emerging, remains a supplementary rather than an equal force in the linguistic landscape.

#### B. Identity in the Culinary LL



Figure 4. Multilingual Signage

Building on the patterns identified in the previous section, this part of the analysis shifts its focus from languages presence to their symbolic and identity-related implications. While Arabic remains the dominant linguistic resource in Hail's culinary signage, the selective incorporation of English and other foreign languages introduces additional layers of meaning that extend beyond utilitarian communication. To unpack these dynamics, the discussion is organised around three interrelated dimensions of identity: the assertion of local identity, the evocation of a broader pan-Arab identity, and the projection of a global cosmopolitan identity.

##### (a). Local Saudi Identity

Hail's culinary LL strongly foregrounds local identity, with Arabic functioning as the dominant and unmarked linguistic code across signage. Arabic-only signs—which constitute the largest share of the dataset—not only ensure accessibility for the local population but also affirm belonging, tradition, and cultural continuity. Through the interplay of names, scripts, and visual cues, many businesses emphasise their rootedness in the local Saudi context by drawing on references such as regional geography, religious symbolism, historical and moral figures, personal names, dialectal expressions, local culinary traditions, traditional architecture, and collective cultural values. These layered references work together to produce a rich semiotic environment that affirms local identity and shared cultural knowledge.

##### 1. Geographic and Regional References

Many business names draw directly on geographic affiliations to evoke regional pride and spatial familiarity. The name 'در الشمال' (Pearls of the North) situates the restaurant within the broader northern region of Saudi Arabia, elevating the locale through the imagery of precious pearls. Similarly, 'زوایا برزان' (Corners of Barzan) makes explicit reference to Barzan, a well-known neighbourhood in Hail, embedding the restaurant within the cultural geography of the city.

Likewise, 'غنى حائل' (Hail's Richness) further reinforces this spatial rooting by linking the establishment directly to Hail itself, creating a sense of pride and ownership. The name 'ديرتنا' (Our Town) deepens this regional anchoring through the collective suffix 'نا' (our), invoking a sense of communal identity and solidarity while visually referencing the traditional architecture and values of Hail's historical settlements. Names like 'زاوية البوادي' (The Bedouin's Corner) and 'الزاد السعودي' (Saudi Supplies) all contribute to pride in Saudi identity.

## 2. Religious Symbolism

Local identity is also constructed through the integration of religious themes and values in signage. For example, 'الوادي المبارك' (The Blessed Valley) draws together spiritual and natural imagery, with 'المبارك' (Blessed) evoking divine favour in Islamic thought and 'الوادي' (Valley) grounding the name in the landscape of Arabia. Similarly, 'المن', transliterated into Latin script on signage as 'Alman', references the Qur'anic term for divine manna—a miraculous food sent from heaven. The use of such sacred terms not only aligns the businesses with Islamic heritage but also signals purity, trustworthiness, and spiritual resonance for consumers.

## 3. Historical and Moral Figures

Signage also draws from well-known cultural and historical icons to reinforce values such as generosity and hospitality. The restaurant 'حاتم جريل', transliterated on signage as 'HATEM GRILL', and 'نار حاتم' (Hatem's Fire) both evoke the figure of Hatem al-Ta'i, a legendary pre-Islamic poet renowned for his generosity and strongly associated with the region of Hail. By invoking this cultural symbol, the businesses align themselves with ideals of abundance, welcome, and moral virtue, extending a symbolic continuity between ancient hospitality and modern dining.

## 4. Personal Names and Dialectal Expressions

Another way local identity is reinforced is through the use of Saudi personal names in signage, establishing familiarity and cultural recognition. Examples such as 'مطعم منيرة للرز البخاري' (Munira Restaurant for Bukhari Rice), 'شاورما عواد' (Awad Shawarma), and 'عساف' (Assaf) rely on widely recognized Saudi names to create a sense of trust and cultural intimacy. In addition, many restaurants incorporate regional dialects and terms specific to Hail or the Gulf. The restaurant 'خوش حوف' (Perfect Cooking) features a Haili phrase with strong local resonance, while 'زلطة' (Salad), a term still used by elders in Hail and some nearby cities, evokes nostalgia and continuity with regional linguistic heritage. The name 'بو معروف' employs the Gulf kunyah form—literally "Father of Maarouf"—a traditional naming convention that indexes familiarity, age-based respect, and social ties.

## 5. Culinary Traditions and Local Dishes

Several names draw explicitly on well-known Saudi dishes, further grounding the establishments in regional culinary identity. For instance, 'حاشيكم' (Your Hashee) and 'حاشي الجبل' (Mountain Hashee) reference حاشي, or young camel meat—a cherished Saudi delicacy. Similarly, 'مظبيكم' plays on مظبي, a dish prepared by roasting meat on stones or coals, closely linked to traditional Saudi cooking methods. These names assert a kind of culinary authenticity that appeals to local customers' sense of taste, memory, and tradition.

## 6. Traditional Architecture and Aesthetics

Some establishments go beyond language by invoking material and architectural symbols of Saudi heritage. For instance, 'مطعم التراثي' (The Heritage Restaurant) not only refers to tradition in name but is often constructed or decorated in the style of old Gulf houses, using earth tones, mud brick, and wooden décor to suggest historical continuity. Similarly, 'شاي وحصير' (Tea and Straw Mat) references two elements central to traditional Saudi gatherings: the sharing of tea and sitting on woven mats 'حصير'. In these cases, the visual, spatial, and linguistic elements of the signage all collaborate to embed the business in a deeply local aesthetic.

## 7. Cultural Values and Collective Identity

Some naming practices reflect broader cultural values embedded in Haili and Gulf society. The restaurant 'مطعم اخوان البخاري' (Brothers of Bukhari Restaurant) emphasises the kinship bond of brotherhood, which is a core social value in Gulf society. The name suggests familial warmth and trustworthiness, much like home-cooked food. Likewise, the use of phrases such as 'اصبروا ابتلشنا' (Wait, we're stuck)—used humorously as an apology for a delay in opening—written in the Haili dialect above a photo of a Saudi actor in traditional attire, reflects humour, resilience, and cultural relatability, particularly for younger audiences. Even names like 'نمد', which refers to a shallow water basin or spring commonly found in desert regions, accompanied by an image of a camel, emphasise deep historical ties to desert life and Bedouin values, with the camel symbolising endurance, heritage, and the rhythm of nomadic life. Together, these signs show how Arabic language and symbolism are deployed not merely for communication, but as tools for asserting authenticity, tradition, and cultural belonging in the culinary landscape of Hail.

### (b). Pan-Arab Identity

While many restaurants assert Saudi or Hail-specific belonging, another notable trend in the LL is the invocation of a broader Pan-Arab identity. These establishments use names that resonate across the Arab world, drawing on shared

geography, cultural references, and dialectal variations to foster a sense of regional affiliation that extends beyond the local.

### 1. Arab National, Regional, and Cultural References

One major strategy through which pan-Arab identity is constructed involves the explicit naming of Arab cities, nationalities, and regional references. These names evoke widely recognisable places with rich cultural and culinary legacies, creating a sense of regional familiarity and prestige. For example, restaurants like 'تميز الدمشقي' (The Damascene Distinction) and 'ماسة الدمشقي' (The Damascene Diamond) associate themselves with Damascus, a city often considered a historical city in the Arab world. Likewise, 'المذاق المغربي' (The Moroccan Taste) signals North African influence, drawing on the unique culinary and cultural cachet of Moroccan cuisine. Also, 'دجاج صيدا' (Sidon Chicken) references Sidon, a well-known coastal city in Lebanon, while 'صحارى الرافدين' (Mesopotamian Deserts) invokes the ancient region of Mesopotamia, corresponding to present-day Iraq.

Another example is 'مطاعم ذوق النشامي' (Al-Nashama Taste Restaurants), which anchors its branding in cultural archetypes rooted in Jordanian identity. The term 'النشامي' (Al-Nashama) is a culturally loaded expression often associated with Jordanian heritage. It conveys qualities such as bravery, pride, and traditional hospitality—attributes deeply admired in Arab societies. This word resonates across Arab societies as a symbol of nobility and collective pride. Through such references, businesses infuse their identities with rich national symbolism while appealing to a regional Arab clientele. These names function not only as geographic anchors but also as semiotic resources for constructing pride, quality, and trust. These examples project a sense of Arab unity and cultural heritage that transcends national borders, presenting each restaurant as a representative of a broader Arab civilization.

### 2. Arab Dishes and Shared Culinary Heritage

Beyond place-based references, some signs in Hail draw on a shared Arab culinary repertoire to articulate pan-Arab identity. Dishes such as 'ورق عنب' (Stuffed Vine Leaves), 'لقيمات' (Fried Dough Balls), 'حلوم' (Halloumi Cheese), 'رغيف' (Bread and Ghee), and 'كرك' (Karak Tea) are widely recognised across the Arab world. Though now common in Saudi Arabia, many originate from other Arab regions, and their presence on signage appeals to a collective culinary memory that transcends borders. The act of naming these dishes highlights not only their culinary familiarity but also the transnational cultural networks that have enabled their circulation across the Arab world. These choices subtly encode hospitality, regional sophistication, and a cosmopolitan openness to diverse Arab and neighbouring cultural influences.

### 3. Dialectal Diversity and Cross-Arab Appeal

Pan-Arab identity is further manifested through dialectal variation—particularly the incorporation of non-Saudi Arabic dialects into shop names. A notable example is 'قهوة الست' (The Lady's Café), where the term 'الست' (al-sett) is drawn from Egyptian Arabic, commonly used to denote a respected woman. Its use in a Haili context conjures associations with Egyptian cultural sophistication and nostalgia, especially through its cinematic and musical legacy. This kind of inter-dialectal borrowing is both strategic and affective: it enables businesses to appeal to Arab expatriates and culturally savvy locals, while simultaneously enriching the linguistic landscape with multi-regional connotations. These dialectal features operate alongside national references and culinary items to solidify an Arab regional voice within the signage, suggesting that pan-Arab identity in Hail is as much about language and social imagination as it is about food.

### (c). Global Cosmopolitan Identity

This section explores how culinary signage in Hail constructs a sense of global affiliation, modernity, and hybridity. It focuses on the symbolic use of English, hybrid naming strategies, transcultural food references and personal names, and visual elements like national colours. Together, these practices contribute to a cosmopolitan culinary landscape where global influences intersect with local sensibilities.

#### 1. English as a Symbol of Global Prestige

The use of English in Hail's culinary signage symbolises global prestige, modernity, and cosmopolitan aspiration. Often appearing as the primary branding language or alongside Arabic, English operates less as a practical tool and more as a marker of trendiness, international quality, and youth-oriented identity. A number of businesses adopt fully English brand names—such as 'Key', 'ROAD BURGER', 'DIET NATION', 'START Speciality Coffee', and 'Shine'—paired with minimalist logos and Latin scripts. These aesthetic choices echo Western fast-casual branding and frame the establishment as modern and globally fluent. Their meanings—'ROAD BURGER' (mobility), 'DIET NATION' (health), 'START' (ambition), 'Shine' (confidence), 'Key' (opportunity)—are semantically aspirational, even if not fully comprehended by all.

Invented brand names such as 'Infesto' (transliterated into Arabic as 'انفيسستو') and 'لافيقور' 'Lavior' further demonstrate how English morphological structures and sound aesthetics are strategically utilised to construct upscale, modern brand personas—even when the terms lack meaning in standard English. These coined names are selected for their phonetic appeal, memorability, and international tonality, rather than for semantic transparency. This effect is heightened when paired with sleek logos and lifestyle-oriented taglines. For instance, 'Infesto' is accompanied by the Arabic phrase 'بيكري' 'بيكري' ('Bakery and More'). Although written in Arabic script, the word 'بيكري' (Bakery) is an English loanword that may

be unfamiliar to Arabic-only speakers, while 'أكثر' (More), despite being an Arabic word, is semantically vague in isolation. Together, the phrase clarifies the shop's offerings while reinforcing its cosmopolitan branding strategy. This example illustrates how even Arabic-scripted elements can contribute to an English-dominated aesthetic and ideological orientation.

In these cases, Arabic plays a secondary role—transliterating English terms or providing minimal clarification. This functional asymmetry reveals the elevated symbolic status of English as the language of global belonging, prestige, and forward-looking identity. Ultimately, English in Hail's culinary landscape serves as a semiotic resource that aligns local entrepreneurship with international branding norms, projecting an image of modernity that is aspirational, youthful, and globally connected.

## 2. Transcultural Food References and Personal Names

In addition to English, another strategy for projecting cosmopolitan identity in Hail's culinary signage is the use of transcultural food references and internationally recognisable personal names. These draw from global culinary traditions—Asian, Mediterranean, South Asian—while blending with local linguistic forms, positioning eateries as globally aware yet locally grounded. Several businesses incorporate South Asian and East Asian food elements into their brand identities, reflecting both the popularity and perceived prestige of these culinary traditions. For example, names featuring the word 'Tikka' evoke South Asian grilled meat culture, rooted in Indian and Pakistani cuisines, yet globally understood. Similarly, brands such as 'ساکورا' ('Sakura') the Japanese word for cherry blossom symbolises beauty and delicacy. Despite appearing in Arabic script, these names retain strong foreign associations, using Arabic as a medium for conveying international flavour.

Italian and Mediterranean cuisines also feature prominently. The name 'CasaPasta' transliterated to 'كازاباستا' fuses the Italian words casa (home) and pasta, invoking both comfort and European refinement. Also, 'ماسا باستا' (Masa Pasta), another pasta-focused eatery, uses Arabic script for its name but enhances its Italian identity through visual cues, as discussed in the next subsection. These visual and linguistic strategies work together to signal authenticity, elegance, and international quality—hallmarks of Italian culinary branding. Such signage positions these establishments as globally aware while still accessible to Arabic-speaking consumers.

Personal names are also employed to enhance global appeal. For instance, 'Mama Somy Sushi & Noodles' mixes the Arabic term Mama with English references to East Asian cuisine, while 'Somy' likely references East Asian naming conventions. Likewise, 'كومار' 'KUMAR' and 'راجو' (Raju) are common South Asian names used to infuse branding with cultural specificity and personality. Written in Arabic, English, or both, these names humanise the brand and index foreign culinary traditions.

These hybrid naming strategies—whether referencing food types or personal names—demonstrate how culinary signage in Hail strategically blends cultural codes to construct brand identities that are at once familiar and globally trendy. The layering of Arabic, English, and other linguistic elements, alongside visual symbols reflects a broader practice of linguistic and cultural fusion. Businesses employ these signs not simply to inform but to perform cosmopolitanism, inviting consumers into a world of diverse and border-crossing culinary experiences.

## 3. Visual Symbolism and National Colours

While direct representations of national flags are largely absent in Hail's culinary signage, the strategic use of national colour schemes plays an important semiotic role in communicating global cultural affiliations. For instance, the restaurant 'ماسا باستا' (Masa Pasta) features a bold Latin 'M' in its logo stylised with the colours of the Italian flag—green, white, and red—alongside a graphic of penne pasta. Though the actual flag is not depicted, this colour arrangement subtly evokes Italy's culinary identity and contributes to the restaurant's cosmopolitan branding. The combination of linguistic, visual, and gastronomic elements helps to construct an international image rooted in global food culture.

Building on this pattern, other establishments also use colour-coded cues to evoke national identity. One such example is 'Keen Mexican Grill', which features a vibrant combination of red, green, and yellow—colours closely associated with the Mexican flag—without showing the flag explicitly. The visual design includes a traditional Mexican sombrero and a stylized red chili pepper integrated into the signage, elements that together symbolise Mexican cultural identity and cuisine. The name appears in English 'Keen Mexican Grill' and in Arabic 'كين للمأكولات المكسيكية', with the explicit mention of 'Mexican' reinforcing the brand's cultural orientation. These examples illustrate how businesses deploy a blend of visual symbols, colour schemes, and multilingual text to signal national affiliations and insert themselves into globally circulating food imaginaries—without relying on formal national emblems.

## V. DISCUSSION

This study examined the linguistic and semiotic strategies used in culinary signage across Hail City, focusing on how identity is constructed through language presence and visual symbolism. The findings revealed a complex LL shaped by overlapping orientations toward local rootedness, pan-Arab affiliation, and global cosmopolitanism. These findings resonate with, extend, and in some cases nuance previous LL research, especially within culinary domains.

Hail's culinary signage does more than communicate the name of a business—it acts as a dynamic site of identity construction. The dominant presence of Arabic across monolingual and bilingual signs affirms its role in anchoring local

Saudi identity. Names referencing regional geography, religious language, and cultural icons highlight Arabic's symbolic and communicative significance. This supports earlier LL research (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006) showing how language visibility in public space expresses cultural continuity and in-group belonging.

Signage invoking pan-Arab identity through shared dishes, Arab cities, and dialectal markers reflects a broader strategy of cultural alignment. This positioning frames Hail not only as a Saudi city but also part of a wider Arab cultural network. Such findings align with Leeman and Modan's (2009) argument that signage performs both symbolic and spatial roles, here demonstrating alignment with collective Arab values and cuisines.

An increasing number of signs adopting English, invented brand names, and foreign visual motifs reflect a cosmopolitan orientation. These include businesses using aspirational terms (e.g., START) or culinary references like Sushi, and personal non-Arabic names. These strategies mirror global trends noted by Pennycook and Otsuji (2015), where English and global scripts act as resources for modernity, prestige, and youth identity—often independent of functional communication.

Visual semiotics also contribute to identity work. Some signs use culturally loaded imagery (e.g., camels), while others employ flag-based colour schemes (e.g., Italian red-green-white) without showing actual flags. These elements reinforce the idea that signage is a multimodal ensemble (Scollon & Scollon-Wong, 2003) where text, visuals, and layout co-construct meaning.

Hail culinary signage reflects a localised version of globalisation. Businesses blend local values with global references, creating identities that are neither purely traditional nor wholly global. English complements rather than replaces Arabic, symbolising modern consumer culture. The use of foreign personal names and dishes suggests a flexible approach to multicultural branding. This echoes global findings (e.g., Liu, 2025; Yuan, 2024; Benu et al., 2025; Abas, 2019) where signage negotiates authenticity, marketability, and symbolic capital.

This study fills a gap in Saudi LL literature by offering a broad, data-rich account of culinary signage in an urban context. Unlike earlier studies focused on coffee shops or signage-menu mismatches (e.g., Hazaea & Qassem, 2025), it captures a wider range of businesses and semiotic practices. It also illustrates how Vision 2030 reforms—emphasising tourism, openness, and diversification—are shaping urban visual culture. Signage emerges as a site where these reforms are not only reflected but also actively negotiated.

The findings have policy implications. The prominent yet uneven use of English, often in hybrid or transliterated forms, raises questions about the enforcement of Arabisation. While these policies aim to preserve linguistic identity, businesses continue to use global scripts for branding and appeal. This calls for more context-sensitive guidelines recognising signage's multifunctional role in hospitality and tourism.

Some limitations exist. First, the study is limited to Hail, and findings may not generalise to other Saudi cities. Second, it focused only on outward-facing signs, not menus or interior signage. Lastly, consumer perspectives were not explored, so interpretations remain speculative.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored how culinary signage in Hail City functions as a linguistic and semiotic resource for constructing identity. By analysing language choices and visual elements, the research highlighted the interplay between local rootedness, pan-Arab cultural affiliation, and global cosmopolitanism. Arabic, as the dominant language, affirms local identity and cultural heritage, while selective uses of English and other languages signal modernity, prestige, or authenticity.

Multimodal designs—including colour schemes, imagery, and layout—emerged as central tools in negotiating audience reach and cultural meaning. The findings position signage as more than a communicative device: it is a site of symbolic and spatial performance, reflecting broader social, economic, and political transformations under initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030.

Given its focus on one Saudi city, this study highlights avenues for future research. Comparative studies with larger metropolitan areas (e.g., Riyadh) or culturally distinct regions could reveal broader patterns. Examining consumer perspectives—such as how locals versus tourists or Arabic versus non-Arabic speakers interpret signage—would deepen understanding of audience reception. Together, these directions invite more nuanced, multimodal investigations of how everyday culinary spaces reflect and shape Saudi Arabia's evolving linguistic and cultural landscapes.

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