frontiers | Frontiers in Communication

TYPE Original Research
PUBLISHED 03 July 2024
DOI 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1379935

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Jakob R. E. Leimgruber,
University of Regensburg, Germany

REVIEWED BY
Sven Leuckert,
Technical University Dresden, Germany
Robert Blackwood,
University of Liverpool, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Betty Lanteigne
✉ blanteigne@lcc.lt

RECEIVED 31 January 2024
ACCEPTED 12 June 2024
PUBLISHED 03 July 2024

CITATION
Lanteigne B and Najafi H (2024) The role of context in transactional English: spoken utterances and public signs in the UAE. *Front. Commun.* 9:1379935. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1379935

The role of context in transactional English: spoken utterances and public signs in the UAE

Betty Lanteigne[1]* and Hedieh Najafi[2]

[1]Department of English, LCC International University, Klaipėda, Lithuania, [2]Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, American University of Afghanistan, Doha, Qatar

Transactional and interactional English communications tend to be on a continuum rather than a dichotomy, with some communications having characteristics of both, yet others tending more toward one type of communication or the other. In general, written communication tends to be more informative (transactional) than spoken communication, which tends to include more interactional communication. Using insights from geosemiotics and linguistic analysis, this study analyzed spoken English-as-a-lingua-franca (ELF) communication observed in Dubai/Sharjah and written communication in public signs in Al Ain, looking at how contextual influences play a role in facilitating hearer/reader understanding of the meaning being communicated. From identified ELF communications in Dubai/Sharjah and photographed public signs with English text in Al Ain in the UAE, 10 spoken and eight written instances of transactional English were selected to be analyzed in terms of patterns in the role of context in hearer/reader understanding of intended meaning. Comparing/contrasting contextualization of these spoken and written transactional English communications revealed the influence of the context on hearer/reader awareness of spatiotemporal aspects, background schemata (social/societal, cultural, economic, and religious aspects), prior communications, and ELF mutual accommodation of meaning in terms of understanding and interpreting intended meaning, as well as identifying aspects of contextualization common to both spoken and written transactional English.

KEYWORDS

English-as-a-lingua-franca utterances, public signs, United Arab Emirates, contextual influences, intended meaning, transactional English, linguistic landscape, geosemiotics

1 Introduction

A common experience in human interaction is that meaning communicated through language may change according to context. For example, a speaker's words can be taken out of context, eliciting responses such as "That's not what I meant" or "You're twisting what I said"—because the hearer left out information crucial to the full explanation of what was said by whom to whom in what setting and situation. In addition, the meaning of a word used in different situations can be notably dissimilar, as seen with the expression "I smoked it" having different meanings in these three contexts: referring to the speaker smoking one specific cigarette, indicating that the speaker prepared a particular meat by smoking it, or

communicating the speaker's exultation at being spectacularly successful with a specific project. To understand the intended meaning, a hearer would need to know what the context is (e.g., the societal and social situation, location, and setting), what the speaker has been doing, and thus what "it" is referring to.

This need for awareness of and sensitivity to context is particularly acute in intercultural communication between people coming from very diverse language and sociocultural backgrounds in a place that for some or all is unfamiliar (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). Such a space is found in the multilingual, multinational, multicultural cities in Arab Gulf States. Language use in real-world communication does not occur in a social vacuum, and this volume, *Transactional and Transnational Contact within World Englishes: The Gulf Region and Beyond*, reflects the importance of context in transactional English in "any post-colonial context worldwide" (Call for Chapters for Lorenz et al., 2020) where transactional language is used to communicate information required to accomplish tasks.

One such Gulf region is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country that includes two regions (among others) where transactional English is used: Dubai/Sharjah and Al Ain. Because of the multinational, multilingual population in the UAE, although Arabic is the official language, English is frequently used as a *lingua franca* in these cities.

In the first region the neighboring cities of Dubai and Sharjah border each other, as mentioned in Lanteigne (2017) and Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021), connected by roads, highways, and public transport, with people living in one city and working or shopping in the other. Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021) indicated that, in the Dubai/Sharjah metropolitan area, "[b]ecause many of the tourists, business visitors, and indeed, a large number of the residents, do not speak Arabic, English is used by speakers of diverse language backgrounds for a broad range of interactions ranging from high-level business communication to basic transactions" (p. 2). Dubai is a city famous throughout the world for shopping, international trade, and tourism, while Sharjah is known more for Arab culture, history, arts, and education.

The second region, the city of Al Ain, is smaller and quieter than either Dubai or Sharjah but with a much larger Emirati presence than in the Dubai/Sharjah region. It is known for its emphasis on Emirati heritage and culture and is less frequented by international tourists than Dubai. In light of the fact that real-world transactional communication in English occurs in both written and spoken forms in the UAE to accomplish tasks of daily life and work-related tasks, analysis of both forms can give insight into fundamental characteristics of transactional communication, particularly in terms of contextualization. Thus, the focus of this qualitative research is exploration of contextual influences in transactional spoken and written English used in the UAE, which may include English as a second language (with official status, being required in public signage) and English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) spoken or written. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

What are contextual influences essential to hearer/reader understanding of intended meaning in ELF utterances in Dubai/Sharjah vs. written communication in English in public signage in Al Ain?

How/why are these influences essential to hearer/reader understanding of the intended meaning?

Section 2 of this chapter explains the theoretical background of this analysis, while Section 3 describes how the ELF utterances and public signs in English were selected from prior research. Section 4 presents the qualitative analysis of the selected signs and utterances, comparing/contrasting patterns in contextual influences on speaker/writer meaning, and Section 5 highlights the main findings and discusses implications for English language teaching as well as implications for linguistic landscape studies and pragmatics research.

2 Theoretical background

This analysis of contextualization of spoken and written transactional English in the UAE draws on insights from linguistic landscape studies and geosemiotics, as well as from pragmatics and ELF studies.

2.1 Transactional English

Two major functions of communicative language use, transactional and interactional, were proposed by Brown and Yule (1983). They described "primarily transactional communication" as overall emphasizing clear conveyance of the desired informational content, whereas "primarily interactional communication" is focused overall on interpersonal interaction and relationships, and communication of personal views (p. 1). Brown and Yule's two communicative functions of language reflect insights from earlier categories of language functions: referential vs. emotive (Jakobson, 1960), ideational vs. impersonal (Halliday, 1970), and descriptive vs. social-expressive (Lyons, 1977).

In its role as a language widely chosen for convenient communication around the world, transactional use of English occurs in a wide variety of contexts, notably in business or commercial communications. Thus, numerous studies have sought to document real-world communication events involving workplace English in various industries, and research about primarily transactional tasks includes Chew, 2005; Evans, 2010; Kassim and Ali, 2010. The *Routledge Handbook of Language in the Workplace* (Vine, 2018), an entire edited volume focusing on how language is used in workplaces around the world, includes chapters about transactional language accomplishing work purposes. Van (2018) analyzed naturally occurring communication in the Vietnamese hospitality industry, specifically focusing on currency exchange communications between hotel staff and guests which were primarily transactional but which also contained interactional elements. Kim (2021) also pointed out the increasing awareness of the need to base business English courses on actual workplace English communication and investigated Korean white-collar employees' views of their business communication needs, finding that employees in manufacturing, finance, advertising, service, shipping, and law, needed both transactional and non-transactional written and spoken English skills.

Although written language tends to be transactional more commonly than does spoken language, as Brown and Yule (1983) observed, transactional communication can be spoken or written. Jackson and Stockwell (2011) pointed out that some spoken communication is written but is intended to be spoken (as in news broadcasting) and that some written communication is like

conversation (as in online chatting). Regarding English use in business communications, Kim's (2021) white-collar employee Korean participants identified as necessary in their workplaces transactional English communication tasks that were both written (i.e., emailing, texting, using Messenger, writing business reports, and meeting materials) and spoken (i.e., negotiations, presentations, formal meetings, informal meetings, and conference calls). Thus, it is seen that both spoken and written transactional communication can range from formal to informal and be professional or personal.

2.2 Contextualization

This section highlights insights from three fields of study which focus on contextualization of meaning being communicated in public places—linguistic landscape studies, geosemiotics, and pragmatics—as well as *lingua franca* studies.

The field of linguistic landscape studies uses linguistic analyses to explore meaning communicated through language in public places. In their landmark linguistic landscape study, Landry and Bourhis (1997) focused on language use in public signage, defining *linguistic landscape* as "[t]he language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings [which] combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration" (p. 25). This definition of linguistic landscape centered on the language of public signage, including written text in a delineated space. After over a decade of linguistic landscape research being published, in 2015, the international journal *Linguistic Landscape* was launched, introducing linguistic landscape studies' investigation of "systematic patterns in the relationship between LL [linguistic landscape] and society, people, politics, ideology, economics, policy, class and identities, multilingualism, multimodalities and to describe and analyze various forms of representation" (Linguistic Landscape, 2015, p. 1). Expanding its focus, linguistic landscape studies have gone beyond researching written texts in public to include meaning conveyed through sounds (see Scarvaglieri et al., 2013; Pappenhagen et al., 2016; El Ayadi, 2022), scents (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015), and human bodies (Kitis and Milani, 2015; Peck and Stroud, 2015). (See Gorter and Cenoz, 2024 for a thorough explanation of the history of the term *linguistic landscape* as well as developments in the focus of linguistic landscape studies that have expanded to go beyond public signage in urban environments).

The theoretical framework of geosemiotics was introduced by Scollon and Scollon (2003): "study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world" (p. 2) where "language" can be spoken or written, and "actions" can include movements by human bodies, focusing on multiple layers of meaning communicated in the indexable physical world. "Sign" in geosemiotics refers to "any material object that indicates or refers to something other than itself" (p. 3), including signage, people's and things' presence and movements, and written or oral discourse. In describing geosemiotics, Scollon and Scollon (2003) also pointed to interpersonal, social, and societal aspects of semiotic systems, addressing social positioning and power relationships. They explained three main systems of social semiotics which are intertwined in the analysis of social action in place: interaction order, visual semiotics, and place semiotics (p. 7). Interaction order is the semiotic system concerned with social arrangements and social interactions between/among people, which can be analyzed in units of interaction order, such as a "with" (interaction between two people), contact situation, or service encounter. Visual semiotics includes meaning represented through pictures, visual artifacts, people, and objects in the physical world. Place semiotics involve semiotic systems communicating meaning beyond visual representations and people as social actors, describing the environment where the social interactions occur. This can include the visual (sights), auditory (sounds), olfactory (smells), thermal (temperature), and/or haptic (touch). Emplacement, the positioning of objects or persons in the material world, is a key component of place semiotics.

Geosemiotics and linguistic landscape studies (which both draw on other disciplines such as sociolinguistics and discourse analysis) research contextualization of real-world communication of meaning, but a key difference between geosemiotics and linguistic landscape studies is that the common focus of linguistic landscape studies is language in public in various manifestations in real-world conditions, particularly involving multilingualism and/or societal power relations, while geosemiotics looks at "the ways in which this sign system of language indexes the other semiotic systems in the world around language" (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, p. 5) giving a broader portrayal of the scope of social action. The study of geosemiotics focuses less on language-related indexicality (which is studied extensively in linguistics) and more on the interplay of semiotic signs in the physical world. *Indexicality*, according to Scollon and Scollon (2003), is the attribute of language "that it makes part of its meaning because of where it is in the world" (p. 25).

Pragmatics is all about context, and as succinctly explained by Yule (1996), is the study of what speakers mean and how hearers interpret it in real-world communication. Mey (2001) added that pragmatics looks at specific spoken or written communication in a specific setting within a larger social and societal context, going beyond semantic meaning of words and phrases in isolation. Mey also pointed out that understanding language users' intended meaning necessitates considering "the worlds of users" (p. 29) and their "linguistic, social, cultural, and general life context" (p. 30), as well as the larger societal context. Context in general, from a pragmatics perspective (Roberts, 2006), includes the specific discourse event and situation (speakers, hearers, sounds, physical location) as well as the linguistic context, which is the text (oral or written). House (2018), in giving an overview of the development of the concept of context in pragmatics, concluded that a pragmatic framework should describe aspects of context "presumed to be available to the participants in the speech situation," focusing on "those features that are linguistically and socio-culturally relevant for both the speaker producing a particular utterance and the hearer who interprets it" (p. 146). Context as background knowledge shared by speaker and hearer includes the following: participants' knowledge, beliefs and assumptions about temporal, spatial and social settings, previous, ongoing and future (verbal and non-verbal) actions, knowledge of the role and status of speaker and hearer, of spatial and temporal location, of formality level, medium, appropriate subject matter, province or domain determining the register of language (cf. Lyons, 1977: 574; Halliday, 1970) (p. 147).

One aspect of context studied extensively in linguistics from various perspectives is indexicality, and according to Hanks (2011), "[t]here is widespread agreement that indexicality designates the context dependency between utterances and speech contexts" (p. 319).

Discussing connection between context and what is said in both transactional and interactional communication, Brown and Lee (2015) explained that in a conversation, interlocutors' degree of familiarity with each other and consequent degree of shared background knowledge will result in greater or lesser use of assumptions, implicatures, and other unstated meanings, indicating that listeners'/readers' task of interpreting communications includes knowledge of underlying background schemata.

The contextualized utterances being analyzed in this chapter are *lingua franca* communication in English in various situations in Dubai/Sharjah. In defining ELF, Jenkins (2009) referred to a "specific communication context" which is "English being used as a *lingua franca*, the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds" (p. 200). Baker (2009) pointed out that the content of ELF communication, which includes cultural differences, is characterized by considerable variety due to the people and contexts where such communication takes place. Specifically referring to context in *lingua franca* interaction, Canagarajah (2018), pp. 4–5 pointed out five characteristics of how context is crucial to the conveyance of meaning: (1) "relative," meaning that it can be experienced differently between interlocutors, as in global knowledge for one person being local knowledge for another; (2) "expansive," in that references to time and space can be without limits; (3) "layered," with overlapping levels of influence that may come into play, such as city, state, national, and international; (4) "co-constructed by participants" as they interact with each other; and (5) dynamic and active, with the participants' speaking and thinking, physical objects, and the environment all affecting meaning making in interaction. As such, context is integral to the use of ELF, and its use requires speakers and hearers in the specific communication event to be aware of the other participants, their language and sociocultural backgrounds, and the specific context in order to adapt, adjust, and negotiate for effective communication (Seidlhofer, 2011). ELF use is a communicative event involving people from different language and cultural backgrounds, potentially including both non-native English speakers (NNESs) and native English speakers (NESs), who choose to communicate via English, using cooperative co-construction of meaning and mutual accommodation in their specific contexts.

Thus, explanation of language, which inherently is used in context, by combining semantic meaning and pragmatic enrichment gives interpretation of the intended meaning of a specific utterance/written text in its context. These observations apply to language use in real-world communication, be it native language, second language, foreign language, or *lingua franca*, written or spoken.

Three linguistic landscape studies using geosemiotics in their theoretical frameworks looked at public signs in Chinatown, Washington DC, United States; Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt; and Brooklyn, New York City, United States. Lou (2015) used critical discourse analysis and visual semiotic analysis of signs in the Chinatown metro station, which consisted of Verizon Center marketing texts and pictures of local politicians, celebrities, and well-recognized people from the neighborhood, seeking to connect to the Chinese community while maintaining the Verizon Center corporate image. Analysis of place semiotics and indexicality revealed how the corporation used its marketing campaign to connect with the community and at the same time change the image of the neighborhood. Using discourse analysis and social place semiotics, Aboelezz (2014) analyzed pictures of the Tahrir Square Egyptian revolution protests which took place 25 January 2011 to 11 February 2011. The photographed scenes documented the actions that took place in the Tahrir Square protests and the protest messages on banners, placards, flags, clothing, and people's bodies. Analyzing the messages for people's view of the protests revealed that Tahrir Square was a symbolic, central, spiritual, and celebratory public space that was global, connecting the local Tahrir Square protests with communication of political messages to global audiences. The linguistic landscape study by Alhaider (2023) focused on social and commercial signs in a Yemeni Arab community in New York City, using visual semiotics to look at how the linguistic landscape, including signs and images, manifests the Yemeni culture of Arabic-speaking migrants in this community within the English-speaking host country with a preponderance of Arabic language and culture even seen in multilingual signs.

While these three studies focused on public signs and other written texts in their respective locations, this chapter looked at spoken and written transactional English in separate locations: ELF utterances in the Dubai/Sharjah region and public signs in English in Al Ain. In analyzing contextualization of the ELF utterances and public signs in English, the chapter draws on insights from geosemiotics, linguistic landscape studies, and pragmatics, as well as *lingua franca* studies, looking at contextual influences of time, space, social and societal conditions, shared background schemata, and characteristics of ELF, as well as linguistic meaning, to identify commonalities (and differences) in contextualization influences in both oral and written transactional English.

3 Selecting ELF utterances and public signage in the UAE

This section discusses the sources of spoken and written texts as well as the process of selecting the ten and eight most contextually demanding utterances and signs for this chapter. Some of the characteristics of the selected utterances and signs are also discussed in this section.[1]

3.1 Sources for selection of spoken and written texts

Transactional utterances and signs analyzed in this chapter were taken from three sources: basic level ELF utterances in Dubai/Sharjah focusing on jumbled sentence structure, from Lanteigne (2017) and Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021) observed between 2012 and 2018, and photographs of public signs in Al Ain from Najafi et al. (submitted) taken in 2023.

To document that jumbled sentences do occur in real-world English language use (and thus can be the basis for authentic tasks for language assessment), jumbled sentence utterances were identified by

1 To distinguish the term *signs* as used in this chapter regarding public signage from the broader meaning of *signs* as used in semiotic studies, we use *signs* in this chapter in the sense used in Landry and Bourhis (1997): public written texts, especially public signage.

Lanteigne (2017), defining jumbled sentences as consisting of sentence structure not following grammatical structure of standard English(es), as in a taxi driver asking a potential customer "Want taxi Dubai you?" instead of something like "Do you want a taxi to Dubai?" These naturally occurring utterances were simply observed in the course of daily activities by the researcher and research assistants who jotted the words down immediately and added fuller descriptions of the speakers/contexts later. A total of 179 ELF utterances were observed by Lanteigne (2017) and Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021).

The locally developed public signs in English analyzed in this chapter (excluding international franchise signs) were selected from the 797 public signs photographed by Najafi et al. (submitted), who analyzed public signage in Al Ain in all languages.

3.2 Selecting the utterances and signs

3.2.1 Criteria for selection

Criteria for selection of both spoken and written communications were the presence of transactional communication and the need for contextual information to understand the intended meaning, determined by whether or not the intended meaning could be understood when heard/read in isolation. Selecting the chosen utterances and signs was done by the two authors of this study, both of whom were familiar with the UAE context through having lived and worked there.

Narrowing the selection of utterances from Lanteigne (2017) and Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021) and signs from Najafi et al. (submitted) first involved exclusion of texts that did not consist of local transactional English and, second, identification of spoken and written texts requiring contextualization. Since the 179 Dubai/Sharjah ELF utterances were all local, it was only necessary to exclude interactional utterances, resulting in 176 transactional utterances which were primarily basic-level ELF jumbled sentences. Regarding the locally developed signs, ones excluded for consideration in this chapter were signs not written in English, signs which consisted only of numbers, and signs which used transliterated words (apart from personal names) not in common use in the UAE. However, borrowed words such as *oud* and *abaya* are frequently used in English in the UAE, and so signs containing such words were included for consideration. Of the 797 public signs from Najafi et al., 597 were identified as locally developed signs using transactional English.

Next, was determining utterances and signs which required contextualization beyond the utterances and signs themselves. While 86 (49%) out of the 176 transactional ELF utterances from Lanteigne (2017) and Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021) required contextualization, only 45 (7.5%) of the 597 local transactional English signs from Najafi et al. (submitted) required contextual information beyond the signs themselves in order to understand the specific intended meaning. Of these 45 signs, 38 were names of stores which required contextualization because the names did not reveal the products or services offered, making it necessary for readers to look at objects in the stores (spatiotemporal information) to determine the type of store. From these 86 utterances and 45 signs, the ten and eight? most contextually demanding of each, respectively, were chosen for this analysis.

This process of selecting the 10 ELF utterances and eight public signs in English revealed that context was more frequently required in the utterances compared to the signs. This difference is in keeping with the transitoriness of spoken communication vs. the more permanent nature of written communication (Brown and Yule, 1983; Allerton, 1991; Bailey, 2005) which typically seeks to provide the reader in the text with the information necessary to understand the intended meaning. Utterances made in transactional communication, however, can reference what has been said earlier in the conversation or provide additional information if needed; thus, it is not as necessary to provide all required details in a specific utterance within a conversation.

3.2.2 Characteristics of selected utterances and signs

This section describes the ten and eight? transactional English signs. Characteristics of the 10 selected utterances in Dubai/Sharjah were that they were instances of naturally occurring ELF communication in public (without expectation of privacy) ranging from a few words to short sentences using basic-level English involving jumbled syntax.[2] The interlocutors were prioritizing communication of their intended meaning while resourcefully using their basic level English vocabulary and grammar, so all but one of the selected utterances were solely transactional. The one exception included interactional communication using a greeting and a polite form of address prior to the transactional communication. According to Lanteigne (2017) and Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021), the 10 speakers were male and female NNESs interacting with either another NNES from the same or different first language (L1) backgrounds and cultures or an NES, in contexts including store/restaurant sales and service provisions (air conditioning, security, hairdressing, tailoring, shipping, and painting). These two studies identified speakers' nationalities/ethnicity as Arab, Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Pakistani, American, unspecified Asian, and unspecified African.

Characteristics of the eight Al Ain signs in terms of writers/readers were that they could have been written by NNESs and/or NESs (individuals, business owners, school administrators, the municipality), while their readers would have included NNESs and/or NESs who could have been either Al Ain residents or tourists from other countries or other regions in the UAE. Five of the signs included Arabic and English, the languages required by the UAE government to be used in public signage in the UAE. One trilingual sign also included Urdu, which is widely spoken in the UAE as well. Six of the selected signs used Standard English(es) spelling and syntax, while two informal posted signs were more toward basic level ELF in that they focused on communication of meaning more so than grammatical or spelling accuracy.

3.3 Demographics of the two regions

As mentioned above, the utterances of the 10 ELF speakers and the eight English signs in this chapter (from Lanteigne, 2017; Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne, 2021; Najafi et al., submitted) were from two

2 See European Commission (2021) regarding ethics of qualitative covert research.

regions in the UAE (Dubai/Sharjah and Al Ain), multilingual, multinational regions where English is widely used as a *lingua franca* by Emirati citizens and expatriate residents of numerous different nationalities, as well as by international tourists.

The UAE resident population is skewed in terms of age and gender by the large numbers of working-age male expatriates living and working in the UAE. According to 2024 statistics, males are 69.01% and females are 30.99%, and in this Muslim country, the population also includes people of other religions, e.g., Christianity and Hinduism (CIA, 2024). Not all of the emirates report population distribution by nationality, but the 2024 country-wide expatriate population consists of 37.96% Indians, 16.72% Pakistanis, 6.89% Filipinos, 4.23% Egyptians, and 22.72% Others, with the Emirati population being 11.48% (Global Media Insight, 2024).

4 Analysis of ELF utterances and public signs in English

This section discusses the analysis of the ELF utterances in Dubai/Sharjah and signs in English in Al Ain, using insights from geosemiotics, linguistic landscape studies, pragmatics, and ELF studies. First, the utterances and signs are listed in Section 4.1, and then in Sections 4.2–4.5, they are analyzed in terms of contextual influences essential to hearer/reader understanding of intended meaning, how, and why.

4.1 Utterances and public signs

In both spoken and written communication, an interplay of multiple influences leads to hearers/readers understanding intended meaning. This analysis reveals that understanding indexicality, spatiotemporal information, and shared background schemata was necessary for all of the utterances and public signs, while some also required knowledge from prior communication and/or understanding of ELF mutual construction of meaning.

All of the utterances required both spatiotemporal information and shared background schemata in order to understand the speakers' intended meanings. They also were characterized by indexicality in context dependency in their respective speech contexts. Although there were numerous deviations from Standard English(es) vocabulary and syntax in these utterances, they were not of concern to the NESs and NNESs participating in these conversations. Typical of ELF interaction, their focus was on communication of meaning. In nine of these utterances, the speakers' intended meaning was clear to the hearers, who were aware of the contexts in which their interlocutors were speaking and what they were referring to. (Discussed in Section 4.4 is hearer confusion about one utterance, which occurred in the only conversation involving a third person).

Although there is a range of comprehensibility when looking at these selected utterances without contextualization, it is difficult to discern precisely what the speaker means, as is evident by just listing the utterances in isolation here:

Utterance (1). "This one a little bit down this time."
Utterance (2). "The clothing, the same, down."
Utterance (3). "Oh now water have inside. Come looking."
Utterance (4). "You are check this one inside."
Utterance (5). "No coming, no packing."
Utterance (6). "I milkshake you."
Utterance (7). "Good morning, ma'am. Bring bubbles."
Utterance (8). "Outside another people. Only inside."
Utterance (9). "Believe make."
Utterance (10). "Extra coming, only water coming—no product."

The selected public signs clearly involved indexicality and contextualization for readers to fully understand the sign author's intended meaning, some signs more so than others. Listing the texts of the signs here in isolation illustrates the range of challenge in determining the intended meaning:

Sign (1). "No Face Mask."
Sign (2). "Danger No Smoking."
Sign (3). "Accessories."
Sign (4). "ROOM FOR REND BED SPACE 0502144561."
Sign (5). "3 years (partner visa) 2 years visa (with NOC instalment) Family visa (father & mother sponsor) Born baby visa Visa renewal All P.R.O. service U.A.E. Husband visa wife & kids 0522636411."
Sign (6). "Men are forbidden to enter."
Sign (7). "ANWAR AL AMAL GENTS SALOON."
Sign (8). "Card change."

4.2 Spatiotemporal influences

Linguistic landscape studies, geosemiotics, and pragmatics all consider time and space to be part of the context for spoken and written texts. Analysis of the utterances and signs in this chapter reveals that spatiotemporal knowledge was drawn on in all signs and utterances, although more so in some than in others. Influences of time, emplacement, objects, and the overall physical settings were noted (with multiple such influences often coinciding), and discussed here are representative examples for each.

4.2.1 Time

All of the utterances took place at specific times in specific locations, with two utterances (both "with" interactions in conversations between two individuals) making explicit reference to time. Of these, only Utterance (1) "This one a little bit down this time" is discussed here to illustrate the influence of time on understanding meaning. The other, Utterance (3), is discussed in Section 4.2.4, as it is also a strong representative example of physical settings. In addition, one sign in particular, Sign (1), required knowledge of the time period being referenced in order for readers to understand the meaning (in addition to awareness of other aspects of visual and place semiotics).

Taking place in a university setting, Utterance (1) required the hearer to interpret indexical references to time and an object, as well as to have knowledge of prior communication about the air conditioning (AC) not working and to fill in a missing verb. The specific situation was a service encounter in which an Asian-looking maintenance man, standing by the AC thermostat, was explaining to an American female faculty member how he solved the previously communicated AC problem. His explanation required that the hearer understand that the indexical expression "this time" was a reference to the knowledge that there had been prior maintenance calls where something different had been attempted, and this service encounter was trying a new approach. "This time" is a commonly used deictic expression which requires the hearer to know what the temporal

reference is indicating. Gee (2011) explained that "[i]f listeners do not correctly figure out what deictics refer to (using contextual information), then they do not understand what is meant or they misunderstand it" (p. 15). Thus, the hearer, with contextualization, was able to interpret this ELF speaker's intended meaning by combining recognition of indexical meanings and knowledge from prior communication to identify the unstated action: [I will set] "this one" (the thermostat) "a little bit down this time" [unlike before].

With Sign (1) "No Face Mask," awareness of time (as well as visual semiotics, emplacement, and social schemata) played an especially pivotal role in readers' understanding of its meaning (see Figure 1). This sign, reminiscent of the COVID-19 pandemic days, was located at a school entrance. During the time of COVID restrictions, people needed to wear face masks when entering schools in Al Ain. So although the text of the sign ("No Face Mask") seems to tell readers not to wear face masks, the presence of the picture (with X over a symbol of someone without a face mask), the physical location of the sign (school entrance), and the COVID-19 rules that had been in place would lead a reader to interpret the sign as meaning "No face mask, no entry," as in "if you do not wear a face mask, you cannot enter." A lack of awareness of any of these influences could in fact lead the reader to understand the opposite of the intended meaning.

Although all utterances happened at specific times and places, only two had explicit time-deictic references making the temporal influence vital to understanding the intended meaning. Temporal influence was vital for understanding the meaning of one sign ("No Face Mask"), but there was no explicit reference to time in this sign. Instead, time reference was implied through societal knowledge about COVID-era practices.

4.2.2 Emplacement of signs

In analyzing the meaning of signs, pragmatics considers physical location as part of the situation in which written and oral texts occur, while linguistic landscape studies and geosemiotics consider emplacement of written texts as an integral part of the meaning being communicated in public space. Although all eight public signs analyzed in this chapter involved place semiotics (as well as visual semiotics), two signs are notable for influence of sign emplacement on the intended meaning. To illustrate the influence of sign emplacement on reader understanding, Sign (2) is discussed here [the other, Sign (6), is discussed in Section 4.3.2].

FIGURE 1
No face mask.

Sign (2) says "Danger No Smoking" in English, Urdu, and Arabic. While the command in this sign (do not smoke because of danger) is clear, the *why* behind it is not. Understanding the danger referred to in the sign requires awareness of the surrounding physical context and specifically how and where the sign was placed. This trilingual sign was located on a high-voltage electrical box in the parking lot of a private school (see Figures 2A, B). Readers need to see the high-voltage box to understand the danger of smoking near this area. There were other "no smoking" signs present at the school that did not include the word "danger" and thus might or might not have been taken as seriously. In addition, this metal sign clearly was posted permanently in this location, framed, so to speak in concrete, which is in marked contrast to paper posters elsewhere saying "no smoking" or posted paper advertisements in other locations. Therefore, in this sign, the intent of both the sign author and the sign installer in the deliberate placement of this warning sign would have been that the combination of the word "danger" and the readers' knowledge of the proximity of high voltage would emphasize the seriousness of not smoking in this area.

While emplacement is an influence playing an important role in understanding intended meaning of signs, in Sign (2) it is only through the emplacement that the intended meaning becomes clear. In contrast, although interlocutors in conversations can deliberately position (emplace) themselves in specific places to enhance communication, the interlocutors of the utterances of this chapter did not deliberately pre-position themselves for communicative effect. However, in a sense similar to the placement of the other signs posted in appropriate locations, three of the speakers [Utterances (1), (7), and (10)] chose where the planned conversations were to take place because the location was pertinent to their discussions (see Sections 4.2.1, 4.4, and 4.5): the AC repairman discussing the thermostat setting, the shipper bringing packing bubbles, and the vending machine repairman explaining the problem. Unlike with the crucial emplacement of Sign (2), though, the information in these conversations could have been communicated elsewhere, just not as easily. Although not seen in these interactions, it is possible that speakers could deliberately pre-plan where to speak in order to enhance communication of their intended meaning, as in someone speaking on an extremely controversial topic in a free speech zone on a university campus.

4.2.3 Objects in physical surroundings

This section looks at objects in the physical surroundings where service encounters/conversations took place and signs were placed, which played a role in the meaning being communicated. One utterance and one sign are analyzed here to illustrate this general tendency (manifested in all utterances and signs). Objects present in the two areas helped hearers/readers make sense of a giving directions conversation and a sign about accessories for sale in a store.

The general setting for Utterance (2) "The clothing, the same, down" was in a supermarket, and the specific situation was an American female customer asking an Asian-looking male store clerk

FIGURE 2
(A) Danger no smoking. **(B)** Danger no smoking sign in context.

where alarm clocks could be found. Pointing in the general direction of the alarm clocks, the store clerk gave directions, and it was necessary for the customer to see the different sections of the supermarket (the physical setting) in order to interpret those directions. Upon hearing "The clothing," the customer walked in the direction indicated and noticed that the clothing section was on the left and that next to it was a sign saying "Clothing" which the store clerk had indicated by saying "the same." Finally, the customer looked below the clothing section sign ("down") and saw the alarm clocks. In this case, without awareness of physical objects in the supermarket, it would have been impossible for the customer to understand these directions, but with the spatiotemporal knowledge gained through walking in the store, this transactional ELF communication was successful. The intended meaning was that [the alarm clocks were next to] "the clothing" [section], "down" (right below) "the same" (the Clothing section sign).

Sign (3) was for a booth in an Al Ain mall, saying "Accessories" (in both Arabic and English) (see Figure 3). While this sign would seem to be conveying a straightforward message about the products being sold, the text by itself could be interpreted differently by different readers, based on their awareness of the spatiotemporal influences in play. "Accessories" can be used to refer to scarves, belts, and purses, for example, and there are numerous accessories stores in Al Ain malls that sell such products. However, this sign was located in the mall at a booth that sold mobile phones and their accessories, objects which were visible in the booth's window display. Knowledge of this location, which was enhanced by the presence of objects related to mobile phones, is needed for readers to understand what kind of accessories are sold at this place. When readers look at the display right below the sign and see mobile phones, mobile phone covers, and chargers, they understand the intended meaning that the booth is selling mobile phone accessories. Without this spatial information (e.g., just seeing the name in a mall directory), the intended meaning would likely be misunderstood since fashion accessories stores are more common.

These two examples illustrate how objects are part of the physical environment that both hearers and readers make use of in interpreting intended meaning. A key difference between the utterances and signs is that the store clerk told the customer what objects to look for, in contrast to sign readers having to figure out by themselves what physical objects are relevant.

4.2.4 Physical settings

Physical layout of buildings and circumstances in the immediate area (as well as goods/products discussed above) were the most observed aspects of the immediate physical settings providing spatiotemporal information in all conversations and signs. As representative examples, discussed here are utterances in a university courtyard and a tailor shop and a temporary poster about rental accommodations. In all three, awareness of the physical setting helped the hearers/readers interpret the intended meaning.

In the interaction between security guards, Utterance (3), awareness of flooding in the area was crucial to hearer understanding. This utterance "Oh now water have inside. Come looking" required that the hearer be aware of unusual weather in the area and subsequent flooding at the university, which was the setting for this communication. The UAE is a desert region where rain is infrequent, with an average rainfall of 140–200 mm/year (The World Bank Group, 2021), primarily occurring December–March. However, although rare, rainstorms can result in flooding that at times can have destructive effects. Such was the case at the time of this communication between two security guards at a university. The specific situation was that, in order to understand the seriousness of the Asian-looking male speaker's mention of water being inside at that time (temporal deixis), the African-looking male security guard needed to be aware of the then present physical condition of extensive flooding in university buildings. This transactional communication was not merely giving information about the presence of water; it was communicating a sense of urgency beyond the meaning of the words by themselves: "Oh now" [we have] "water coming" (flooding) "inside" [the building], [so] "come looking" (come and see).

Similarly, Utterance (4) "You are check this one inside" required knowledge of the physical layout of a tailor shop. The specific situation that this interaction took place in was interaction between an Arab female customer who had returned to the tailor in order to check the fit of the garment the Pakistani male tailor had been working on. Using two deictic expressions, the tailor told the customer to check the fit of the garment ("this one"), and "inside" was understood to mean the fitting room in the tailor shop. Taken out of context, this utterance would be unclear, but with both speaker and hearer being familiar with the physical setting, the meaning was understood: "Check" [the fit of] "this one" (the garment) "inside" (in the fitting room).

FIGURE 3
Accessories.

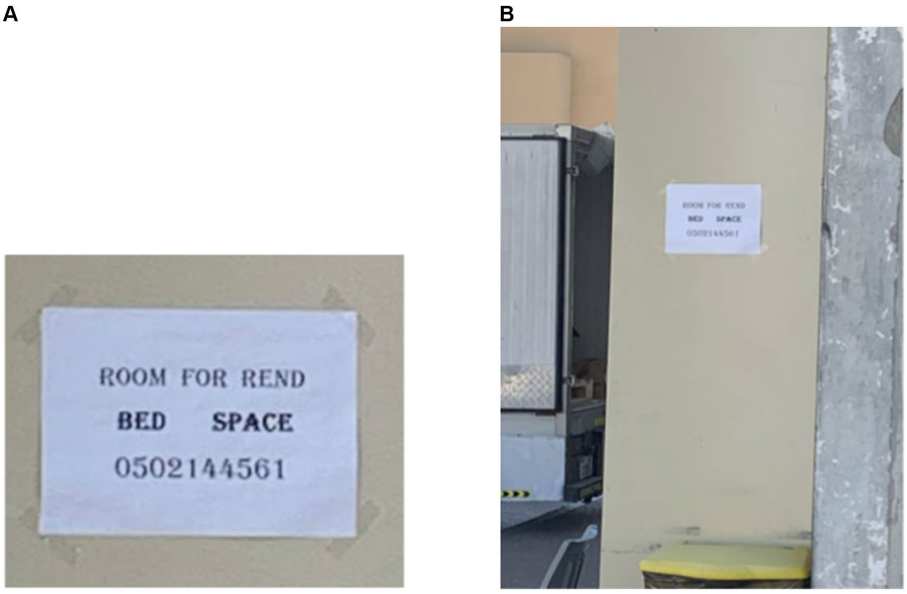

FIGURE 4
(A) Room for rend. **(B)** Room for rend sign in context.

Sign (4) (Figure 4A) is an informal advertisement for accommodations. Similar to the face mask sign [Sign (1)], correct interpretation of this sign also requires knowledge of both spatiotemporal and societal schemata. The physical location of Sign (4) "ROOM FOR REND BED SPACE" helped readers interpret the intended meaning: extremely cheap rental accommodations were available. This informal sign was posted in a low socio-economic neighborhood evidenced by its placement above a trash can and next to walls with peeling paint (see Figure 4B). The first part states "room for rend," which can be interpreted as is by most if not all readers to understand that an accommodation consisting of a room is available for rent. The second part, "bed space," needs societal knowledge relating to this low socio-economic context. Ngeh (2022) explained that in Dubai, bed space is "a form of shared accommodation whereby

a room or apartment is furnished with several (bunk) beds, like in a hostel, and residents rent the bed they occupy, hence the name" (p. 5). Al Ain has similar living accommodation arrangements, so readers familiar with low-cost accommodations would understand that they could rent a bed in such a place. However, for a reader without understanding of different types of low-rent accommodations, the sign might be considered to be advertising a room for rent with enough space to fit a bed.

Awareness of the physical setting played an important role in understanding the intended meanings for both hearers and readers. However, in Utterance (4) the interlocutors drew upon knowledge of an immediate, temporary physical condition due to the weather, something which was not relevant to the eight signs being analyzed. Yet, it is possible that a temporary sign could be posted about an immediate, short-lived environmental situation.

4.3 Background schemata influences

This section discusses the influence of shared background schemata in hearer/reader understanding of meaning, involving both general background information about common practices and social/societal schemata specific to the UAE. However, as seen in the "ROOM FOR REND" sign, background schemata worked in conjunction with spatiotemporal influences.

4.3.1 Common practices

General knowledge about common practices (local or international) was part of the background schemata for six of the utterances and five of the signs. Routine interactions used in many countries referred to in utterances included giving a customer directions to find an item; trying on garments in fitting room; persuasion by a salesperson; an employee needing to wait for manager's permission; ordering food at a drive-through restaurant; and different groups being assigned to different tasks. Furthermore, common practices followed in many countries were understood by sign readers in the following: COVID policies requiring people to wear masks in public; the danger of smoking around high voltage electricity units; visa requirements; and pay phone card switching instructions. Two utterances [(5) and (6)] and one sign [(5)] are used to illustrate the influence of such shared background schemata.

Utterance (5) "No coming, no packing" required that the hearer, an Arab male customer, understand the general policy that there are some actions that store clerks cannot do without permission from their manager, which is common practice in many countries, including the UAE. In a store, a Chinese saleswoman was responding to an Arab male customer who was requesting that she pack some goods that he was purchasing. She had just explained the store policy that the manager has to approve packing goods and was reiterating here that if the manager did not come, she could not pack the purchased goods. The customer, knowing this store policy, understood that "no coming" referred to the manager not being present and that "no packing" referred to her not packing his purchase: "no" [If the manager does not] "come, no" [I cannot] "packing" [pack your purchase].

In addition to involving hearer understanding of general practices, interpreting Utterance (6) "I milkshake you" required knowledge of drive-through restaurant ordering procedure. In this drive-through restaurant setting, a female drive-through operator was listening to an Arab male customer place his order. Typically at a drive-through, the drive-through operator would ask something like "May I take your order?" "What would you like today?" "Would you like to place your order?" or "Can I help you?" The customer would then respond by stating or requesting the desired item(s). In this particular context, the customer responded by saying, "I milkshake you." Expecting that the customer was placing his order, the drive-through operator correctly interpreted his utterance as ordering a milkshake. The key word was "milkshake," and it did not matter to her that the customer's statement would not have made sense in a different context. She was listening for whatever he would say that would indicate a food item that the restaurant sold: "I"['d like a] "milkshake" [from] "you."

Understanding the intended meaning of Sign (5) "3 YEARS (PARTNER VISA) 2 YEARS VISA (WITH NOC INSTALMENT) FAMILY VISA (MOTHER & FATHER SPONSOR) BORN BABY VISA VISA RENEWAL ALL P.R.O. SERVICE U.A.E. HUSBAND VISA WIFE & KIDS 0522636411" draws on knowledge that there are different types of visas required in many countries around the world for people who are not citizens, as well as awareness of UAE societal schemata (see Figure 5). All expatriates working/living in the UAE are required to have a work or residency visa, and this sign advertised assistance with different kinds of visas for expatriates in the UAE, posted in an area of Al Ain where many non-Western expatriates work.

Two acronyms in this advertisement require knowledge of UAE societal practices in the context of visas: "NOC" and "P.R.O."

FIGURE 5
PRO services.

According to the Trade License Zone (2024), a No Objection Certificate (NOC) is a legal statement, for example, made by an employer, indicating there are no issues with what the person in question wishes to do. In the UAE the procedures for getting a visa or sponsoring a person need to be done through a PRO, a Public Relations Officer, according to Pro Partner Group (2024). Readers familiar with expatriate employment requirements in the UAE would likely be familiar with these acronyms, but without awareness of societal schemata to make sense of what is being advertised, these acronyms could be confusing or an unknown part of the advertisement. For example, a Canadian NOC can be the National Occupational Classification (Government of Canada, 2023), and "pro" (without punctuation) could simply mean professional.

Awareness of how common practices can differ in countries around the world is also necessary for understanding what these visas mean in the UAE. A partner visa could be misinterpreted as a partner-in-life visa vs. the intended meaning of business partner visa. Readers need to use their knowledge of societal schemata to know that the UAE only issues wife and husband visas; the UAE does not issue visas for unmarried couples who cohabit. Although "family visa" is a straightforward phrase, it is not clear if employed parents are the sponsors, or if they will be sponsored by employed children. Common practices around the world are that newly born babies of expatriate parents need to be issued a visa, and all expatriates are expected to renew their visas. Regarding a husband visa, a reader has to understand that the wife and kids will be added to the visa of the husband, as the most common practice in the UAE is for the employed husband to be accompanied by his wife and children. (It is unusual for an employed wife to be the visa sponsor for her husband and children, although it is possible).

These two utterances and the one sign are examples of how knowledge of common practices can lead hearers/readers to the intended meaning. While knowledge of international common practices could be enough for hearers in these two interactions, readers of Sign (5) needed both local and international common knowledge to understand the intended meaning of the sign. In addition, one key difference between the utterances and signs is that, due to the fluid nature of a conversation, a hearer has the chance to ask for clarification, but a reader does not have such an opportunity.

4.3.2 Social/societal schemata with religious associations

While numerous utterances and signs relied on common practices (see Section 4.3.1), social/societal practices with religious associations specific to the UAE/Gulf region were referenced in three signs. Reflecting conservative Emirati culture in Al Ain, there are certain places with separate sections for only women. For example, in Emirati homes (and other conservative Muslim homes) it is common to have two sitting areas—one for men and one for women. In addition, separate locations for men and women are found at wedding halls, mosques, and some restaurants, and government schools are gender segregated after grade 4. The consumption of alcohol is forbidden in Islam, and as a Muslim country, the UAE has strict laws regarding sale and consumption of alcohol. Federal law in the UAE restricts the consumption of alcohol in public to establishments legally licensed to serve alcohol (Duncan, 2020), with the exception of the emirate of Sharjah, which is a dry emirate.

This section discusses social/societal practices with religious associations specific to the UAE/Gulf region referenced in two signs [(6) and (7)] about men being forbidden from entering a women's salon and drinking alcohol being illegal in a barbershop. [Sign (5) is discussed in Section 4.3.1 about unmarried couples cohabiting being illegal.]

Sign (6) "Men are forbidden to enter" draws on reader awareness of this societal/religious cultural value in Al Ain, which is that there are certain places, such as some beauty salons, gyms, and spas, that strictly follow gender separation rules (see Figure 6A). For example, an establishment such as the Al Ain Ladies Club takes this matter extremely seriously, to the extent that male drivers are forbidden to enter the parking area of the club to drop off female members and staff. All drop-offs and pick-ups should happen outside the club's gate. (See https://www.mediaoffice.abudhabi/en/topic/al-ain-ladies-club/).

Awareness of this sociocultural/religious schemata is necessary for correct interpretation of this sign. It is clear that men are strictly not allowed to enter the building, but the *why* behind this prohibition is not stated. This sign is placed at the entrance of a ladies' beauty center. Male readers need to see the entrance (place semiotics) and the sign above the building (surrounding linguistic text) that informs readers that this establishment is a beauty center for women in order to understand why they are not allowed in this building (see Figure 6B).

In addition, a reader familiar with the sociocultural/religious schemata about gender separation would not need the spatiotemporal cues to understand that this is an entrance to an establishment in which only women serve other women (i.e., no employees are men), thus forbidding the presence of men. Therefore, this sign is not just telling men to not enter; it is also telling women that they are free to remove their hijabs (dressing modestly; covering heads and necks). A person aware of these cultural schemata would anticipate that women remove their hijabs in places such as gyms, spas, salons, and clubs, for example, to swim in a swimming pool or to get a haircut, as in the case of this women's beauty center.

The second sign in this section, clearly involving sociocultural/religious background schemata in the UAE, is Sign (7) "ANWAR AL AMAL GENTS SALOON" that was positioned above the glass doors of a barbershop in Al Ain in an area which few Westerners frequent (see Figure 7). Potential confusion stems from the word "saloon" in the establishment name. (Spelling of this English word in this context is from transliteration of the word "salon" from English to Arabic and then back to English). While for an American reader or someone familiar with American English, a saloon is likely to be a place where alcohol is served (see Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), in the Gulf region, including the UAE, "saloon" is used as another word for a men's (or women's) salon or a barbershop (Najafi et al., submitted). Rules regarding alcohol consumption in the UAE define the specific cultural and societal schemata that lead to understanding the intended meaning of this sign. Some hotels and their adjacent bars and restaurants in Al Ain are licensed to serve alcohol, but not barbershops.

A sign reader needs to see the physical location of this establishment to realize that "saloon" is referring to a men's salon as barber chairs can be seen from the glass doors of the establishment. Without the relevant spatiotemporal and sociocultural/religious awareness, the name in this sign could be interpreted by some readers as a saloon that serves alcohol exclusively to men. The intended meaning of salon or barbershop in the Anwar Al Amal Gents Saloon

FIGURE 6
(A) Men are forbidden to enter. **(B)** Men are forbidden to enter sign in context.

FIGURE 7
Anwar Al Amal Gents Saloon.

sign, however, would be recognized by readers with local/regional knowledge of "saloon" being used to mean "salon," as well as by readers such as ELF users used to resolving unclear meaning through contextual clues such as the barbershop equipment seen through the windows.

In a multinational, multicultural, multi-religious country like the UAE with residents from all over the world, particularly sensitive cultural practices at times need to be clearly stated, and public signage can be very effective in communicating such information in locations where this knowledge is needed. In many countries around the world, men and women are present together in places like gyms, spas, hairdressers, wedding halls, religious services, and restaurants, and thus they might not be aware of the possibility that such mixing could be forbidden. The "men are forbidden to enter" sign clearly communicates this sociocultural/religious practice. In addition, serving wine or beer to customers in a barbershop is legal in some regions with (CBC News, 2018) or without a liquor license (ABC News, 2016). Someone from such a region seeing a gents saloon sign and noticing barbershop equipment could think that it would be possible to have beer or wine when getting a haircut. In such case, he would need to be aware of the UAE laws about where alcohol can be consumed.

4.4 Prior communication influence

Another component of contextualization concerned information communicated previously, an aspect of shared background knowledge noted in pragmatics in which the conversational participants are aware of what has transpired before their current interaction. Discussed here are two of the utterances [(7) and (8)] and one of the signs [(8)] which required knowledge of prior communication in some form: an earlier agreement between a shipper and a customer, information provided to householders about interior and exterior painting, and the process of switching out a depleted prepaid pay phone card.

Utterance (7) "Good morning, ma'am. Bring bubbles," said by a Filipino male shipper to a female American customer, made reference to shipping arrangements that had been discussed in prior communication between the shipper and customer about packing arrangements. The specific situation was that the shipper was bringing packing bubbles to the customer. Although the primary function of this communication was transactional, the shipper began the conversation with a greeting ("Good morning, ma'am"). The transactional part of his communication ("bring bubbles") required the customer to interpret his intended meaning based on their prior communication and seeing the shipper carrying packing bubbles: He had brought packing bubbles, as he had earlier indicated he would. This utterance was an informative statement, not a command that the customer brings packing bubbles. The customer supplied the missing subject, recognized the time reference intended, and interpreted the statement to mean [I] "bring" (have brought) [the packing] "bubbles."

Utterance (8) "Outside another people. Only inside" is unique among these utterances in that it took a third person to enable the hearer to understand the intended communication, despite prior communication about what would happen. The setting was at faculty housing on a university campus, and the specific situation was that an

Asian-looking male painter had come to paint the house and was talking to the American female faculty householder. Nearby, overhearing the conversation, was a Pakistani male gardener who was aware of the painters going around to the faculty houses, what they were doing, and how they were going about it. There had been prior communication to all faculty in the accommodations that painting would be done both inside and outside during a certain period of time, so the householder was expecting the painter, but she had not been told that two different companies would be doing the work. When she asked about the exterior painting, the painter replied, "Outside another people. Only inside." Lack of knowledge about how the painting would be done and by whom, combined with the incomplete sentence fragments, made it difficult for the householder to interpret the painter's explanation. The nearby gardener realized what the problem was and explained to the householder about the two different companies doing the painting work in two phases. Once that essential background information was known, an utterance that was initially confusing was readily understood. With this explanation, she was able to understand the intended meaning: "Outside" (exterior painting) [will be done by] "another people" (the other company). [I] "only" [do] "inside" (interior painting).

Understanding the meaning of Sign (8) requires understanding information not available in the sign or surrounding area, knowledge of local/global practices (as well as spatiotemporal knowledge). This sign says "Card Change" on a pay phone located in one of the hallways in a mall (see Figures 8A, B). It is important for readers to see the physical location of this sign (by the payment card slot on a public pay phone, next to a push-button) to know that "card change" refers to inserting a prepaid phone card or credit card in the pay phone slot, which is explained and illustrated in the information (surrounding linguistic text) at the top of the public pay phone (Figure 8C).

Similar to some of the spoken ELF utterances drawing on global knowledge, this public pay phone sign draws on background knowledge familiar to some readers (global or local). Public pay phones are present in numerous countries around the world, and thus knowledge of how to use one would include expecting to pay for calls by means such as coins or cards.

For prepaid phone users to be able to follow these instructions regarding changing prepaid phone cards, they need to have been informed that when using a prepaid pay phone, they can switch out a depleted phone card for a new one. This prior communication would likely be from an acquaintance or from the phone company. In the UAE, prepaid phone cards can be purchased from Etisalat (the largest UAE phone company) or other establishments such as supermarkets or convenience stores at gas stations (Etisilat, 2019), and it is possible to use a card more than once until the balance is zero. In addition, it is possible to change or swap a prepaid phone card for a new one if additional funds are necessary, which is what pushing the "card change" button makes possible. Since many people in the mall would have their own mobile phones and thus would not use a pay phone, these instructions are addressing pay phone users who would likely be aware of the fact that they can make calls using prepaid cards which can be switched out when the balance is zero.

This "Card Change" sign and the painter's statement "Outside another people. Only inside" have in common a potential element of confusion for a reader/hearer due to incomplete background knowledge which could have been communicated previously. With the "Card Change" sign, the instructions are difficult for a reader to understand without awareness that a depleted prepaid pay phone card could be switched for a new one, while the hearer of the painter's utterance was confused because of lack of knowledge about two different companies being involved in interior vs. exterior painting.

However, a major difference between the written payphone sign and the painter's ELF utterance is that it was possible for the hearer to ask the painter for clarification (which she likely would have if the gardener had not explained), but a reader of the pay phone sign could not elicit clarification from the sign. A reader unaware of the possibility of switching prepaid cards would have to find someone to ask what the sign meant (or just end the call when the card was depleted). This contrast between reading a sign and participating in a conversation illustrates a key difference between reading written transactional English and participating in a primarily transactional conversation in English: in a conversation, it is possible to negotiate understanding and clarify any confusion stemming from unclear prior conversation, but doing so is not possible with a hard copy sign. (Interactive digital signs might allow for clarification, though).

4.5 Influence of ELF mutual accommodation of meaning

Another influence seen in the ELF utterances was challenges due to the hearers coming from very diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds. When multiple meanings were possible semantically, hearers used contextual knowledge to determine the intended meaning (characteristic of ELF communication). This mutual accommodation of meaning is most evident in two utterances in service encounters: A retail sales interaction and a vending machine service interaction.

Utterance (9) "believe make" took place in a retail setting where an Indian salesman was seeking to convince an Arab female customer to buy a product. The preceding interaction had been about a product the customer was considering purchasing but was undecided. So to convince her that what he was saying was true, he said, "Believe make." However, the words "believe make" could be intended to mean *make believe*, as in imaginary or not real, but with the word order switched. Yet, such an interpretation would not fit with the context of a salesman selling a product, which the customer would realize since she knew he wanted her to buy the product. Instead, the salesman was following a common ELF practice of "overusing" words which are very general in meaning (Seidlhofer, 2004, p. 220). In this case, "make" was used to communicate the idea of doing an action (believing), and the customer understood that the salesman wanted her to believe him: "believe" [me]. Between his resourceful use of ELF and her understanding of his communicative intent, they came to a mutual understanding of the intended meaning in this sales interaction, focusing on the transactional purpose rather than on English grammar.

Utterance (10) "Extra coming, only water coming. No product" was made by an Asian-looking vending machine maintenance man who was explaining to an American female customer what the problem was with the hot beverage vending machine. Similar to the preceding retail sales interaction, mutual accommodation of meaning in this service encounter involved the speaker's resourceful use of ELF and the hearer's flexibility. Understanding this utterance required background knowledge about how the beverage machine was supposed to work, as well as the customer's prior communication that only water was coming out when tea was selected. Upon

FIGURE 8
(A) Card change. **(B)** Close up of card change sign. **(C)** Surrounding text of card change sign.

inspecting the vending machine, the maintenance man noticed that it contained no tea mix (which is to be combined with water), so he said "extra coming," and the customer interpreted "extra" to mean *more* or *again* as in [if you select tea again and more liquid comes], and then he said, "only water coming," which made sense to the customer because the reported problem was that only water was being dispensed. The comment "no product" was understood to refer to tea because from the vending company perspective, the product being sold was tea. Thus, the intended meaning was understood: [If] "extra" (more) "com(es)," [it will] "only" [be] "water—no product" (tea).

ELF flexibility and accommodation are seen in hearer understanding of these two utterances using words which could be interpreted in multiple ways, facilitated by awareness of the situation and the interpersonal interaction. Although public signage does not allow for such interlocutor interaction, three signs discussed above did require readers to figure out the intended meaning using knowledge beyond the text and surroundings: "card change," "no face mask," and "room for rend." Instead of conversational interaction, ELF readers utilized clues from the physical context and local/international policies and practices.

5 Conclusion

This linguistic landscape study set out to compare/contrast aspects of contextualization necessary for hearers/readers to understand spoken and written transactional English communication in the Dubai/Sharjah metropolitan area and the city of Al Ain, in the UAE, using insights from geosemiotics and pragmatics. These transactional communications, basic level jumbled sentence ELF utterances and public signs in English (as well as other languages), were clearly part of the linguistic landscape, situated in specific places within the larger UAE context. Without contextualizing information from the material world where the utterances took place and the signs were situated, the complete meanings would have been unclear. Geosemiotic and linguistic analysis of these utterances and signs revealed that there were features of contextualization common to both spoken and written forms of communication: spatiotemporal

knowledge from the immediate physical settings including objects present, emplacement, and temporal deixis; background schemata including practices common worldwide and UAE social/societal influences; and prior communication.

There were both utterances and signs needing knowledge of prior communication. Although it would be expected that public signage would provide all of the necessary information through the text, any images included, and the immediate physical context, there were still signs that required prior communication for complete reader understanding. One such example was the text of the "Card Change" sign, which, to be understood, needed visual and place semiotics as well as reader awareness of the UAE prepaid phone card system. However, in the spoken utterances when prior communication was needed, it was possible for hearers to ask their interlocutors for clarification, but this recourse was not possible in signs where the needed prior knowledge was unknown to readers, although it likely was meant to have been communicated to the public at large or specific groups of people.

Another influence seen in both the utterances and signs was challenges due to the speakers/hearers/readers/writers coming from very diverse lingua-cultural backgrounds. When multiple meanings were possible semantically, hearers and readers needed to use contextual knowledge to determine the intended meaning (characteristic of ELF communication). For example, the utterance "believe make" could have been interpreted "make believe," but the context of a salesperson seeking to persuade a potential customer enabled the hearer to interpret the utterance correctly: "believe me." Similarly, a reader of the gents saloon sign would have read the physical context as well as the sign and thus known that the establishment was a barbershop and not a bar.

Although clearly there were similarities between the spoken and written transactional English in these utterances and signs, there were definite differences. In keeping with the transitory nature of spontaneous, unrecorded spoken communication, not all of the required information was explicitly stated in the selected 10 ELF utterances. Hearers were expected to know general social and societal background information as well as understandings specific to the setting and discourse the interlocutors were in, as well as any prior communication. These spoken exchanges allowed opportunity for clarification or negotiation of meaning, which was not possible when reading the signs. In contrast, the written signs were permanent (some more so than others) in that the only information beyond the text, surrounding linguistic text, and any pictures in the sign was spatiotemporal information from the immediate physical context and common social, societal, religious, sociocultural, and/or multinational schemata expected to be known by readers in the Al Ain context. This contrast was quite notable between the painter utterance "Outside another people. Only inside," which involved prior communication and required explanation by a third party, and the "Men are forbidden to enter" sign involving placement, surrounding text, and societal/religious knowledge. Signs in general were more explicit than the spoken communications, reflecting a general tendency for most of the more permanent signs to be considered and pre-planned before being posted (less so were some signs that were written on pieces of paper and posted temporarily, such as the "ROOM FOR REND" sign). Emplacement of the danger sign near a high voltage box was crucial to communicate its urgent message, while in contrast, the location of the tea machine service encounter was helpful but not crucial for the customer to understand the intended meaning (although prior communication was).

Immediate implications concerning the role of contextualization in these local transactional ELF utterances and English signs center around English language teaching and sign writing. For English language teaching in regions where transactional English is used (spoken and written) in intercultural communication, it would be valuable for students to learn from the sociopragmatic skills of ELF users (accommodation, negotiation of meaning, awareness of physical, interpersonal, social, societal, and global schemata). For Al Ain use of English in transactional communication in signs, public sign writers should be aware of information that needs to be provided for their targeted readers to understand their intended meaning and also to be aware of multiple ways that their signs could be interpreted.

Cultural literacy is important for people arriving and living in a country different from their own. New arrivals in the UAE who know English might not consider language a challenge because the UAE is a country where English is a *lingua franca*, but in reality, they may not necessarily understand the intended meanings of spoken and written communications if they do not have social/societal, religious, and cultural literacy specific to the region.

Suggestions for research involving English language teaching/learning stem from the specific focus of this chapter which analyzed naturally occurring jumbled sentence utterances and locally developed public signage, excluding international franchise signs. Teaching and assessing English should be based on real-world English communication, and real-world transactional English in the UAE is not limited to jumbled sentences. Furthermore, it consists of English at proficiency levels ranging from a few words to fluent, accurate, and sophisticated English use. It is also true that in order for readers of international franchise signs to understand the signs' intended meaning, they may require additional information gained through contextualization. It would thus be even more revealing to study contextualization needs of a wider range of proficiency levels in transactional English and contextualization needs for international franchise signs to be understood in specific local contexts. In addition, it would be revealing to explore how a cross-section of sign readers process visual and place semiotics in an intercultural context.

Implications beyond English language teaching concern both linguistic landscape studies and pragmatics. First is the value of geosemiotic analysis in linguistic landscape studies for portraying a more complete picture of meaning making in linguistic landscapes indexing time, space, visual objects, and physical settings, along with linguistic and discourse analysis. This observation is in line with Gorter and Cenoz's (2024) view of how valuable geosemiotics has been as a theoretical background for linguistic landscape research that analyzes public signs in depth. This chapter demonstrates the complexity of contextualization in both ELF conversations and public signage in intercultural communication between people of different lingua-cultures in multicultural settings.

Interplay of multiple contextual influences happens all the time in real-world communication, spoken and written, because it involves people communicating meaning with each other in specific times, places, and individual/social/societal contexts in the material world, drawing on information from shared background schemata and prior communication. ELF communication in particular also utilizes mutual accommodation of meaning. In studying meaning through language, both pragmatics and semantics address context, with pragmatics considering individual, social, and societal influences on speakers' and hearers' understanding of meaning in contexts, and

semantics looking at the meanings of words and phrases, including defining what words and phrases would mean in specific contexts. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) listed 31 definitions for "smoke" as a noun and another 31 definitions for it as a verb—far more than the three meanings identified in the introduction to this chapter for the sentence "I smoked it." But what about considering the influence on meaning making of interaction order, visual, and place semiotics? As seen in Hausendorf and Jucker (2022), pragmatics research in particular could benefit from investigating contextual influences using insights from geosemiotics about meaning making and interpretation in the material world.

Data availability statement

The ELF utterances analyzed in this study were published in Lanteigne (2017) and Parra-Guinaldo and Lanteigne (2021). Requests to access these datasets should be directed to blanteigne@lcc.lt.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the American University of Sharjah Institutional Review Board. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants or the participants' legal guardians/next of kin in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements.

Author contributions

BL: Software, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. HN: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of LCC International University, especially Robin Gingerich, Head of the Department of English and MA TESOL Program, and Librarians Jolanta Kaun and Beata Girskienė, as well as insightful observations made by two Frontiers reviewers.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

References

ABC News. (2016). New law allowing barbershops and beauty salons to serve alcohol. Available at: https://abc30.com/barbershops-alcohol-beauty-salon-law/1534368/ (Accessed May 10, 2024)

Aboelezz, M. (2014). The geosemiotics of Tahrir Square: a study of the relationship between discourse and space. *J. Lang. Pol.* 13, 599–622. doi: 10.1075/jlp.13.1.02abo

Alhaider, S. M. (2023). Linguistic landscape of Arabs in New York City: application of a geosemiotics analysis. *ISPRS Int. J. Geo Inf.* 12, 1–19. doi: 10.3390/ijgi12050192

Allerton, D. J. (1991). The greater precision of spoken language: four examples from English. *Engl. Stud.* 72, 470–478. doi: 10.1080/00138389108598774

Bailey, K. (2005). "Issues in teaching speaking skills to adult ESOL learners" in *Review of adult learning and literacy, volume 6 (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy)*. eds. J. Comings, B. Garner and C. Smith (Routledge ebook), 113–164.

Baker, W. (2009). The cultures of English as a lingua franca. *TESOL Q.* 43, 567–592. doi: 10.1002/j.1545-7249.2009.tb00187.x

Brown, H. D., and Lee, H. (2015). Teaching from principles: an interactive approach to language pedagogy. *4th* Edn. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.

Brown, G., and Yule, G. (1983). Discourse analysis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cambridge Dictionary. (2024). Saloon definition. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/saloon (Accessed January 17, 2024)

Canagarajah, S. (2018). The unit and focus of analysis in lingua franca English interactions: in search of a method. *Int. J. Biling. Educ. Biling.* 21, 805–824. doi: 10.1080/13670050.2018.1474850

CBC News. (2018). Spas, salons, and barbers can now offer bubbles with a side of beauty as liquor board changes rules. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-liquor-licences-spas-barbershops-salons-1.4569739 (Accessed May 11, 2024)

Chew, K.-S. (2005). An investigation of the English language skills used by new entrants in banks in Hong Kong. *Engl. Specif. Purp.* 24, 423–435. doi: 10.1016/j.esp.2005.02.004

CIA. (2024). United Arab Emirates: people and society. Available at: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/united-arab-emirates/#people-and-society (Accessed April 11, 2024)

Duncan, G. (2020). UAE legal reforms: new alcohol laws explained. Available at: https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/courts/uae-legal-reforms-new-alcohol-laws-explained-1.1107842 (Accessed January 11, 2024)

El Ayadi, N. (2022). Linguistic soundwalks: setting out ways to explore the relationship between linguistic soundscapes and experiences of social diversity. *Soc. Cult. Geogr.* 23, 227–249. doi: 10.1080/14649365.2019.1707861

Etisilat. (2019). Smart payphone cards. Available at: https://uat.etisalat.ae/en/consumer/home/elife/fixed-phones/calling_cards.jsp (Accessed January 9, 2024)

European Commission. (2021). Ethics in social science and humanities. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/ethics-in-social-science-and-humanities_he_en.pdf (Accessed April 4, 2024)

Evans, S. (2010). Business as usual: the use of English in the professional world in Hong Kong. *Engl. Specif. Purp.* 29, 153–167. doi: 10.1016/j.esp.2009.11.005

Gee, J. P. (2011). *How to do discourse analysis: A toolkit*. New York: Routledge.

Global Media Insight. (2024). United Arab Emirates population statistics 2024. Available at: https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/#nationality (Accessed April 18, 2024)

Gorter, D., and Cenoz, J. (2024). A panorama of linguistic landscape studies. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

Government of Canada. (2023). About the National Occupational Classification. Available at: https://noc.esdc.gc.ca/Home/AboutTheNoc (Accessed April 18, 2024)

Halliday, M. A. K. (1970). "Language structure and language function" in *New horizons in linguistics*. ed. J. Lyons (England: Penguin: Harmondsworth, Middlesex), 140–165.

Hanks, W. F. (2011). "Deixis and indexicality" in *Foundations of pragmatics*. eds. W. Bublitz and N. R. Norrick (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton), 315–346.

Hausendorf, H., and Jucker, A. H. (2022). "1. Doing space: the pragmatics of language and space" in Pragmatics of space. eds. A. H. Jucker and H. Hausendorf (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton), 1–20.

House, J. (2018). "Translation studies and pragmatics" in *Pragmatics and its interfaces*. eds. C. Ilie and N. R. Norrick (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company ebook), 143–162.

Jackson, H., and Stockwell, P. (2011). An introduction to the nature and functions of language. London: Continuum International.

Jakobson, R. (1960). "Closing statement: linguistics and poetics" in *Style in language*. ed. T. A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 350–377.

Jenkins, J. (2009). English as a lingua franca: interpretation and attitudes. *World Englishes* 28, 200–207. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-971X.2009.01582.x

Kassim, H., and Ali, F. (2010). English communicative events and skills needed at the workplace: feedback from the industry. *Engl. Specif. Purp.* 29, 168–182. doi: 10.1016/j.esp.2009.10.002

Kim, S.-H. (2021). Analyzing workplace English communication use and needs: insights from Korean corporate employees. *J. Pan-Pacific Assoc. Appl. Ling.* 25, 1–24. doi: 10.25256/PAAL.25.1.1

Kitis, E. D., and Milani, T. M. (2015). The performativity of the body: turbulent spaces in Greece. *Ling. Landscape* 1, 268–290. doi: 10.1075/ll.1.3.04kit

Landry, R., and Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality: an empirical study. *J. Lang. Soc. Psychol.* 16, 23–49. doi: 10.1177/0261927X970161002

Lanteigne, B. (2017). Unscrambling jumbled sentences: an authentic task for English language assessment? *Stud. Second Lang. Learn. Teaching* 7, 251–273. doi: 10.14746/ssllt.2017.7.2.5

Linguistic Landscape (2015). A new journal. *Ling. Landscape Int. J.* 1, 1–5. doi: 10.1075/ll.1.1-2.001int

Lorenz, E., Leimgruber, J., and Vida-Mannl, M. (Eds.) (2020). Transactional and transnational contact within world Englishes: the Gulf region and beyond. Available at: https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/45674/transactional-and-transnational-contact-within-world-englishes-the-gulf-region-and-beyond

Lou, J. J. (2015). "Space and place as context" in *Discourse in context. Contemporary applied linguistics*. ed. J. Flowerdew, vol. 3 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing), 205–223.

Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics*, vol. *2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mey, J. L. (2001). *Pragmatics: an introduction. 2nd* Edn. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Najafi, H, Lanteigne, B., and Husni, R. (submitted). The linguistic landscape in multilingual Al Ain: representing language policy and the multilingual population? Łódź, Poland: Research in Language, Lodz University Press.

Ngeh, J. (2022). 'Bed-space' housing in Dubai: African migrants, ambivalence towards authorities and gender differences. *Ethnography* 2022:146613812210986. doi: 10.1177/14661381221098610

Oxford English Dictionary. (2023). Smoke definition. Available at: https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=smoke (Accessed April 19, 2024)

Pappenhagen, R., Scarvaglieri, C., and Redder, A. (2016). "Expanding the linguistic landscape scenery? Action theory and linguistic soundscaping" in *Negotiating and contesting identities in linguistic landscapes*. eds. R. Blackwood, E. Lanza and H. Woldemariam (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 147–162.

Parra-Guinaldo, V., and Lanteigne, B. (2021). "Morpho-syntactic features of transactional ELF in Dubai/Sharjah" in *Multilingual global cities: Singapore, Hong Kong, and Dubai*. eds. P. Siemund and J. Leimgruber (New York: Routledge), 303–320.

Peck, A., and Stroud, C. (2015). Skinscapes. Linguistic. *Landscape* 1, 133–151. doi: 10.1075/ll.1.1-2.08pec

Pennycook, A., and Otsuji, E. (2015). Making scents of the landscape. *Ling. Landscape* 1, 191–212. doi: 10.1075/ll.1.3.01pen

Pro Partner Group. (2024). About pro services in Dubai. Available at: https://www.propartnergroup.com/locations/dubai/pro-services/ (Accessed April 18, 2024)

Roberts, C. (2006). "Context in dynamic interpretation" in *Handbook of pragmatics*. eds. L. R. Horn and G. Ward (Oxford: Blackwell), 197–220.

Scarvaglieri, C., Redder, A., Pappenhagen, R., and Brehmer, B. (2013). "Capturing diversity: linguistic land- and soundscaping" in *Linguistic superdiversity in urban areas: research approaches*. eds. J. Duarte and I. Gogolin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins), 45–73.

Scollon, R., and Scollon, S. W. (2003). *Discourses in place: language in the material world*. London: Routledge.

Seidlhofer, B. (2004). Research perspectives on teaching English as a lingua franca. *Annu. Rev. Appl. Linguist.* 24, 209–239. doi: 10.1017/S0267190504000145

Seidlhofer, B. (2011). *Understanding English as a lingua Franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The World Bank Group. (2021). United Arab Emirates - climate change knowledge portal. Available at: https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/united-arab-emirates/climate-data-historical (Accessed April 17, 2024)

Trade License Zone. (2024). No objection certificate in the UAE. Available at: https://tlz.ae/no-objection-certificates-in-the-uae/ (Accessed April 17, 2024)

Van, V. T. H. (2018). An investigation into English language use in the Vietnamese, hospitality industry: the language of money exchange. *Ho Chi Minh City Open Univ. J. Sci.* 8, 14–22. doi: 10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.8.2.279.2018

Vine, B. (Ed.) (2018). *The Routledge handbook of language in the workplace*. New York: Routledge.

Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.