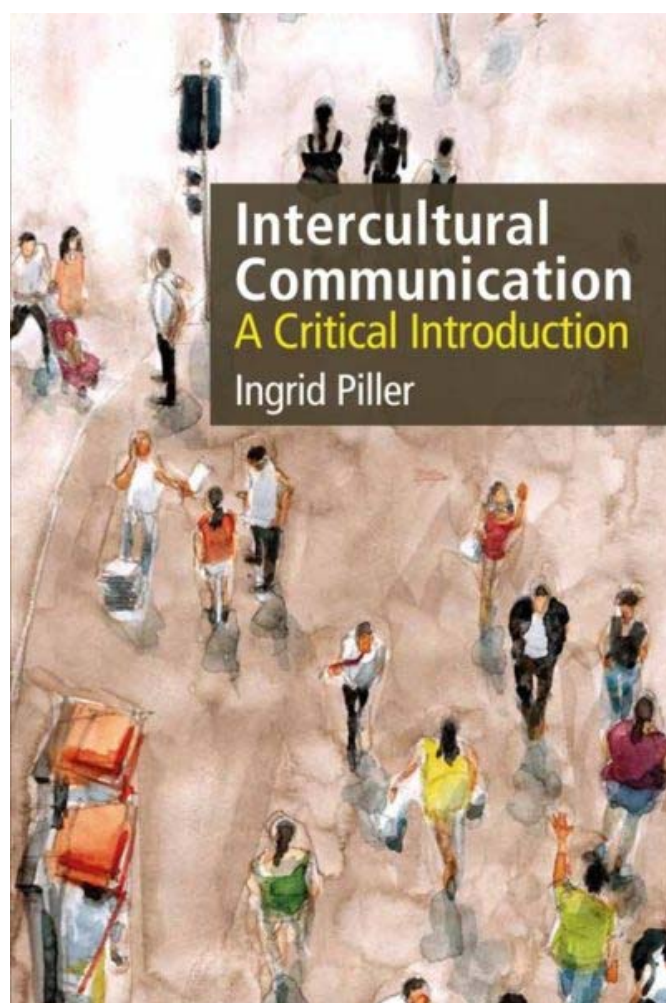


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The banal nationalism of intercultural communication advice

By Ingrid Piller

7-9 minutes



Intercultural communication advice is a strange genre. Filling shelves and shelves in bookshops and libraries and now with a well-established presence on the Internet and in training workshops, it portrays a national world where people interact only as representatives of their nations and their identities are conditioned by nothing but their nationality. In the second edition of [Intercultural](#)

[Communication](#), which is due out in July, I have collected lots of examples that purportedly teach people how to deal with ‘Chinese communication style’, or what ‘the French’ mean when they ‘want to say 100 things [but] verbalise 150 things’ or how to establish relationships ‘in Brazil.’

The national character stereotypes of intercultural communication advice are completely mono-dimensional and not inflected by any other aspects of their identities. They are presented as free of class, gender, ethnicity, regional background, personal traits or any other individuating aspects of their being. Much intercultural communication advice is so obviously lacking in common sense – people obviously are rarely, if ever, stick figure representatives of national stereotypes – that it is intriguing to consider why the genre is so successful and continues to flourish.

I suspect it is due to a mismatch between what intercultural communication advice says it does and what it actually does. Ostensibly, intercultural communication advice aims to teach readers better communication skills and to make them more aware of difference and diversity. However, the genre actually does a lot of additional discursive work: it sustains the nation as a key category, presents national belonging as overriding any other aspects of identity, and, consequently, renders other aspects of identity invisible – in short, intercultural communication advice constitutes a prime example of banal nationalism.

The term ‘banal nationalism’ was introduced by the social psychologist Michael Billig ‘to cover the ideological habits which enable the established nations of the West to be reproduced’ (Billig, 1995, p. 6).

Many people think of nationalism as extremism. However, Billig points out that nationalism is the endemic condition of established


nation states, that it is enacted and re-enacted daily in many mundane, almost unnoticeable, hence 'banal', ways. It is these banal forms of nationalism that lead people to identify with a nation. Examples of banal nationalism are everywhere although they often go unnoticed. Typically, the discourses of banal nationalism emanate directly from state institutions. They are then taken up by non-state actors and become enmeshed with a range of discourses that at first glance have nothing to do with nationalism at all, such as intercultural communication advice.

فَرَزَنَدَانِ اِيْران

ما گُلهايِ خندانيم
ما سرزمينِ خود را
ما بايد دانا باشيم
از بهرِ حفظِ ايران
آباد باش اي ايران
از ما فرزندانِ خود

فَرَزَنَدَانِ اِيْرانيم
ما تَنَدِ جانِ مي دانيم
هُشيار و بينا باشيم
بايد توانا باشيم
آزاد باش اي ايران
دلشاد باش اي ايران

عناصير بهمن شريف



مِيهِن

كشورِ ما ايران است.
ما در ايرانِ زندگي مي كنيم.
ما ايراني هستيم.
كشورِ ايران شهرها و روستاهايِ بسيار دارد.
بعضي از مردمِ ايران در شهرها زندگي مي كنند.
بعضي از مردمِ ايران در روستاها زندگي مي كنند.
مردمِ ايران در هر جا كه زندگي كنند ايراني هستند.
ميهنِ ما ايران است.
ما ميهنِ خود را دوست داريم.

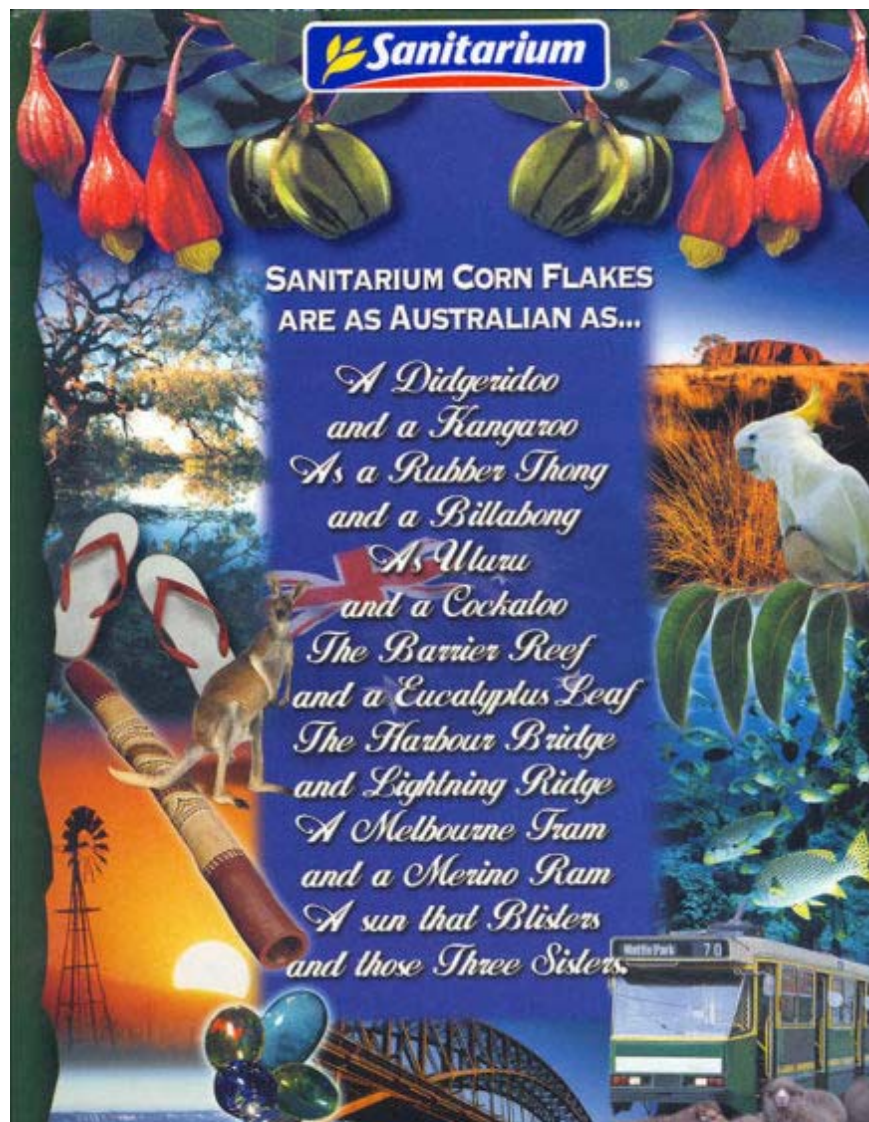
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Page from Persian primer: reading passage 'We are the children of Iran'

The discourses of banal nationalism are often embedded in the practices of state institutions. Schooling is a prime example of the way in which children are socialised into a national identity. It is school where we become members of the nation and where we are taught to think of ourselves as nationals. The Pledge of Allegiance in many public schools in the USA is an oft-quoted example. On the other side of the world, in Australia, many public schools hold a weekly assembly, where the school community comes together to listen to a speech, watch a performance or be

part of an award ceremony. The joint singing of the national anthem plays a central part in the school assembly. In yet another example, Indonesian public schools conduct a flag-raising event every Monday morning and also on every 17th of the month (in commemoration of the national Independence Day, which is celebrated on 17 August).

In addition to ceremonial activities such as these, the socialisation into the nation is also part of teaching content in many schools around the world: there are the lyrics of national poems that are used to teach students how to read and write, the national anthem that is taught in music and recital lessons, the focus of much history teaching on national history, or the valorisation of the national language as the only legitimate medium of educational activities.





Banal nationalism on a cornflakes box

Schooling is widely controlled by the state and the fact that it is used as a vehicle to socialise students into the nation is maybe not particularly surprising. However, the discourses of banal nationalism also emanate from less likely sources. Billig's (1995) example of the daily weather forecast on TV is a particularly convincing one: the daily weather forecast is usually presented against an image of the national map – as if national borders were meaningful to weather patterns. Banal nationalism in sports has also been widely studied: sporting competitions are typically framed as national competitions and most spectators are more likely to support co-national competitors on the basis of their nationality rather than using criteria such as sportsmanship or elegance of the game.

Yet another domain of banal nationalism can be found in consumer advertising, where national imagery is used to create positive associations with a product or service or consumption in general. At the same time, the use of national imagery in consumer advertising increases the presence of national imagery in the mundane spaces of everyday life and thereby continually reinforces the message of national belonging. The discourses of banal nationalism that come associated with consumer advertising have come to pervade our private lives.

Associating products with national imagery is a widely used marketing strategy in Australia, just as it is in many other countries (click here for examples of [a car painted in the Union Jack](#), [French on cookies](#) or [UAE-themed coffee and cake](#)).

Through everyday items such as the cornflakes box in the image, national symbols enter mundane everyday spaces such as supermarket shelves and the breakfast table in our homes. They

keep circulating in those spaces as constant small reminders of national identity.

National identity is a discursive construction – a highly pervasive one but a construction nonetheless. This point is basic to most of the contemporary social sciences but it continues to elude the literature on intercultural communication, where national identity tends to be treated as a given. In the end, intercultural communication advice is nothing but yet another instance of banal nationalism, a discourse that reinforces readers' sense of national belonging rather than one that leads them to genuinely engage with difference and diversity.

[ResearchBlogging.org](http://www.researchblogging.org) References

- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Piller, I. (2017). *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction* (2nd ed.) Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.