

Banal multilingualism

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As someone who is concerned about [Australia's monolingual mindset](#) and the damage it does to [individuals](#) and [our society as a whole](#), I probably should have been pleased to discover this souvenir apron and stove gloves in a Sydney dollar store. As someone who also finds the [commercialization of banal nationalism](#) thoroughly irritating, I was, well, irritated. Why would anyone go about cooking draped in the Australian flag?! Personally, I think it shows a lack of respect for the flag but then, maybe, it's tacky enough to be considered cool.

This particular piece of Australia for sale differs from the myriad of similar items on the market in its multilingualism. The product associates the national flag with the country name in six different languages. The product thus serves to make multilingualism part of the national imagery – a project I should presumably welcome. It's the trivial and tokenistic nature of the multilingualism on the apron and gloves that irks me. It reminds me of the British woman who recently made headlines for ["mastering 25 languages."](#) If you read the article, it turned out she knows how to say "hello" in 25 languages. The fact that this is considered newsworthy, even if only in a local paper, is evidence that the

monolingual mindset is alive and well in other countries, too.

The idea that multilingualism is nothing more than saying "hello" or writing "Australia" in different scripts is a key aspect of the monolingual mindset: it makes it seemingly unnecessary for language learners to invest serious time and effort into language learning, and language education policy gets away with 40 minutes of foreign language learning per week as is the case in NSW primary schools: even after years of study, students can't do much more than say "hello" in the language they study. Trivializing multilingualism also forms the basis for the myth that migrants don't want to learn English: if you assume that there is nothing much to language learning, then of course you have to conclude that migrants who are not great language learners are actually willfully refusing to learn English.

Oh, and by the way, writing "Australia" in six different scripts **really** can't be a particularly challenging task once you've decided that that's how you want to design your apron and gloves. However, the producer of this product still managed to mess up the Arabic version. Instead of [أستراليا](#) the letters are written in the wrong direction so that the Arabic version looks something like "Ailartsua" ...

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