

Banal nationalism for breakfast

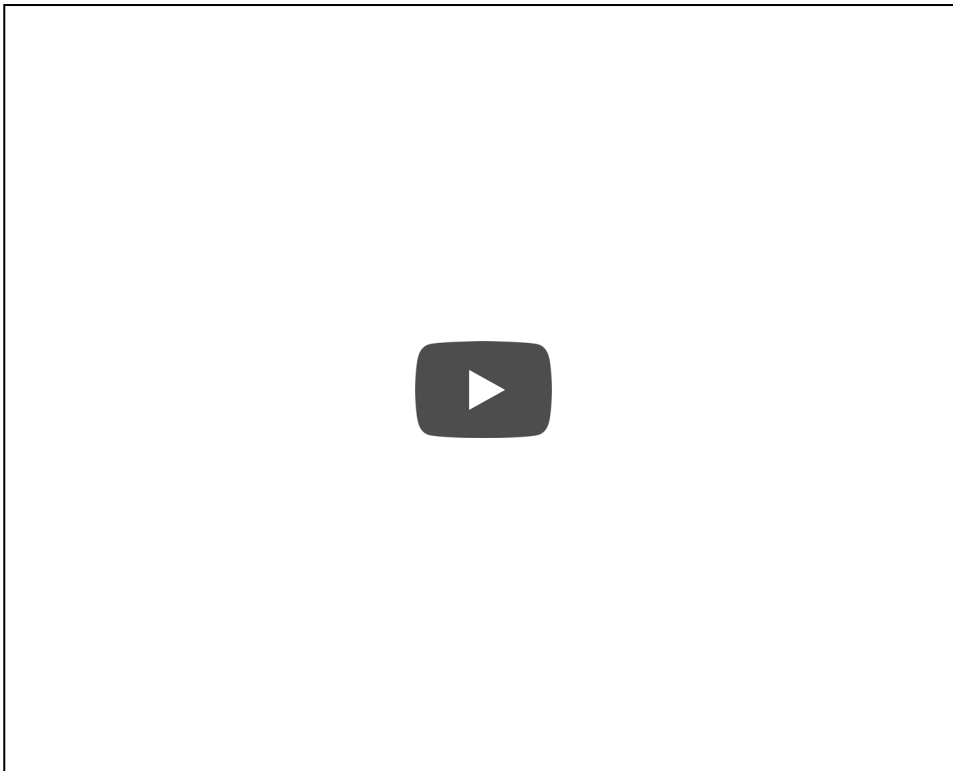
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By Ingrid Piller | May 15, 2010 | Language & consumerism, Recent Posts

Installment #5 in the mini-series on multilingual signage



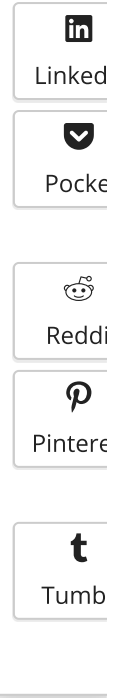
Signage not only appears in public space. Through our consumption of all kinds of products, we bring a multiplicity of signs into our homes. In this slide show, I've assembled images of a range of breakfast foods: cornflakes, yoghurt, bagels, cheese, apple juice, and a cup of tea. The packaging tells us what kind of food we have in front of us and also some nutritional information. However, beyond that factual information they are graced with national imagery. The Australian flag appears on the cornflakes box, the cheese slices and the apple juice; an outline of the Australian map appears on the yoghurt lid and the bagel tag (the tag itself was attached to a plastic bag with bagels in it); the national green-yellow color scheme appears on the back of the juice bottle; and the back of the cornflakes box and the tea mug are overloaded with national icons such as the Sydney Harbor Bridge, the Great Barrier Reef or Ned Kelly. For those who still don't get it, the words "Australian" or "Aussie" are displayed prominently on each product.

But get what? Ostensibly, this display of national imagery provides information about where the products were made. However, [according to the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry](#), around 90% of food consumed in Australia is produced nationally. So, in Australia, the fact that the food on your breakfast table is

Australian isn't really all that newsworthy. In fact, the message that this nationalistic food packaging delivers is a different one. On one level, it is an advertising message: these products are marked as good and desirable because they are associated with the positive imagery of Australian-ness. On another level, however, they trivialize the very national symbols they use to "uplift" their products. And, they remind us, each morning at the breakfast table of our national belonging.

Michael Billig coined the term "banal nationalism" for the way in which mundane, everyday signage such as the labeling on these breakfast foods reminds us of our national identities on a daily basis. "Banal nationalism" refers to "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 and as extreme forms of national ardor such as those of Nazi Germany or the disintegrating Yugoslavia. 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 socialize people into seeing themselves as members of a particular nation who live in a wider world of nation s

Have you had your daily dose of banal nationalism today?



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