



International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance

Memo on Spelling of Antisemitism

IHRA Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial

April 2015

With this memo, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) would like to address the spelling of the term antisemitism, often rendered as ‘anti-Semitism’ and Microsoft’s auto-correct feature. IHRA’s concern is that the hyphenated spelling allows for the possibility of something called ‘Semitism’, which not only legitimizes a form of pseudo- scientific racial classification that was thoroughly discredited by association with Nazi ideology, but also divides the term, stripping it from its meaning of opposition and hatred toward Jews.

The philological term ‘Semitic’ referred to a family of languages originating in the Middle East whose descendant languages today are spoken by millions of people mostly across Western Asia and North Africa. Following this semantic logic, the conjunction of the prefix ‘anti’ with ‘Semitism’ indicates antisemitism as referring to all people who speak Semitic languages or to all those classified as ‘Semites’. The term has, however, since its inception referred to prejudice against Jews alone.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the derived construct ‘Semite’ provided a category to classify humans based on racist pseudo-science. At the same time the neologism ‘antisemitism’, coined by German journalist Wilhelm Marr in 1879 to designate anti-Jewish campaigns, was spread through use by anti-Jewish political movements and the general public. The modern term gained popularity in Germany and Europe incorporating traditional Christian anti-Judaism, political, social and economic anti-Jewish manifestations that arose during the Enlightenment in Europe, and a pseudo-scientific racial theory that culminated in Nazi ideology in the twentieth century. Although the historically new word only came into common usage in the nineteenth century, the term antisemitism is today used to describe and analyze past and present forms of opposition or hatred towards Jews. In German, French, Spanish and many other languages, the term was never hyphenated.

The unhyphenated spelling is favored by many scholars and institutions in order to dispel the idea that there is an entity ‘Semitism’ which ‘anti-Semitism’ opposes. Antisemitism should be read as a unified term so that the meaning of the generic term for modern Jew-hatred is clear. At a time of increased violence and rhetoric aimed towards Jews, it is urgent that there is clarity and no room for confusion

or obfuscation when dealing with antisemitism.

Given that most communication today is electronic, and that Microsoft is a giant in that field, the Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial is concerned that Microsoft's default spelling in English is 'anti-Semitism'. Thus the Committee strongly recommends changing the default spelling of antisemitism so that it does not autocorrect to the hyphenated version of the word.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) is an intergovernmental body whose purpose is to place political and social leaders' support behind the need for Holocaust education, remembrance and research both nationally and internationally. IHRA's Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial was created to address the upsurge in antisemitism and Holocaust denial and trivialization. With this memo, IHRA expresses its concern over possible confusion of a clear understanding of the word 'antisemitism'.