

Anti-semitic? You had better mind your language

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

Some commentators have pointed out that it is a tactic used by the Israeli political establishment to argue that foreign criticism of Israeli government policies is motivated by anti-Semitism.

In fact it's obviously perfectly possible to disapprove of Israeli government actions without being at all anti-Semitic: anti-Semitic means demonstrating prejudice against or hostility to Jews as an entire ethnic or religious group.

For a linguist, though, the interesting thing here is that, while the word anti-Semitic is widely used to mean anti-Jewish, Semitic doesn't mean Jewish. Although, in deeply racist Victorian England, the term Semite came to be used as a kind of distorted euphemism for Jew – a word which was considered 'not very nice' in polite society (much as in living memory we used to say Negro instead of Black) – Semitic actually refers to many more peoples than just the Jews.

In linguistics, Semitic refers to the family of languages which descend from Proto-Semitic, which was spoken somewhere in the Middle East in about the 4th millennium BC. Hebrew, which most of the Old Testament was written in, was one of many ancient Semitic



■ The modern Israeli language, which is Hebrew, is a semitic language - as are those spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

languages. Another was Aramaic, which eventually became the most powerful language in the Middle East. By the first century BC, the widespread adoption of Aramaic had led to the death of Hebrew and other local languages like Phoenician; and Jesus and his disciples would have been mother-tongue speakers of Aramaic.

Hebrew did survive as the liturgical language of the Jews; and after many centuries it was artificially resurrected as the national language of modern Israel. A number of linguists, however, argue that modern Hebrew – they prefer to call it Israeli – is as much a European as a Semitic language, since many of its structures come from Slavic languages

like Polish and from the Germanic language Yiddish.

Aramaic is still spoken by small endangered groups of Syriac Christians, Muslims and Jews in parts of Iran, Iraq, and Syria. But the major Semitic languages in the world today are Amharic, which is the official language of Ethiopia; the Tigre and Tigrinya languages of Eritrea; and Arabic, which is actually better regarded as a group of related languages. You may not realise that one of the official languages of the European Union is also Semitic: that's Maltese. But if you do feel like criticising Malta for some reason, no one is going to call you anti-Semitic.