

ALBANIAN

INTRODUCTION

Generally regarded as the sole survivor of the Illyrian branch of Indo-European languages, Albanian (*gjuha shqipe*) is spoken today in two main dialects: Tosk (southern) and Gheg (northern). The boundary between the two forms is roughly marked by the river Shkumbini. The total number of speakers of both dialects within Albania is about 3 million. In addition, there are some 2 million Gheg speakers in Kosovo, and a few thousand speakers of a third dialect, Arbëresh, in southern Italy and Greece. Albanian literature, mainly in Gheg, dates from the sixteenth century (1555, Buzuku's *Meshari*). Tentative steps towards the creation of a unified national language culminated first in the adoption of the Roman alphabet (1908, Congress of Manastir) and secondly in the selection of the Elbasan (central) dialect (a form of Gheg) as the most suitable base for such a language. From 1920 to the 1950s both dialects were used for literary purposes. In 1952, however, Tosk was officially declared as the base for the new standardized literary language. In Kosovo, Gheg continues to prosper as both spoken and literary language. Tosk and Gheg are mutually intelligible, and differ indeed only in certain points – most importantly in the rhotacism of Tosk: Gheg -VnV- = Tosk -VrV-; e.g. Gheg *zani* 'voice', Tosk *zëri*; and in the formation of the future tense (*see Verb*, below).

COMPENDIUM
OF THE
WORLD'S
LANGUAGES

SECOND EDITION
GEORGE L. CAMPBELL
ISBN 0-415-20298-1 (Set)

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

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