

# THE GEORGIAN LANGUAGE

## QUICK FACTS

- The name 'Georgian' probably derives ultimately from the Old Persian designation Gurj 'a Georgian'. Links to the name of St George or to the Greek γεωργός ('farmer') are likely to be later explanations. The Georgians call their language ქართული ენა *kartuli ena* 'the language of the Karts [i.e., Georgians]' and their country საქართველო *sakartvelo* 'the land of the Karts'.
- Georgian, together with its sister-languages Mingrelian, Laz and Svan, form the Kartvelian (or South Caucasian) language family. No relationship between the members of this family and any other language has been satisfactorily demonstrated. It has been suggested that the early Indo-Europeans may at some stage have lived in close proximity to the ancestors of the Kartvelians.
- Georgian is spoken by about four million people as a first or second language. The overwhelming majority of these live in Georgia, where the language has official status.
- Georgian has long had the reputation of being a difficult language to learn. This is not entirely undeserved, as the verb system is significantly more complex than that of many Eurasian languages. Some have overstated the case, however. One nineteenth-century Georgian scholar was of the opinion that 'all Georgian verbs are irregular', while a German linguist wrote that 'much arbitrariness prevails... such that no two grammarians agree with each other, not even on the main issues'.
- Georgian does not distinguish between male and female in any area of its grammar. The same pronoun, for example, can mean 'he', 'she' or 'it'.
- Georgian has borrowed from the other languages with which it has come into contact. The Arabic, Persian, and Turkish languages constitute a very important source of loanwords. With the exception of some early loans directly from Greek, borrowings from the major European languages have largely been via Russian and are of relatively recent origin.
- Georgian has the most straightforward phonetic system of all the languages native to the Caucasus. Although not remarkable from the point of view of the individual sounds, it does permit some formidable clusters of consonants as, for example, in the words მწვრთნელი *mtsvrtneli* 'trainer' and გვერცეკვინი *gvprtskvi* 'you peel us'.
- The Georgian counting system is decimal below 20, thereafter vigesimal up to 100; for example სამოცდათხუთმეტი *samotsdatkhutmeti* translates as 'three [times] twenty and ten five more', that is, 75.
- Georgian has made use of three different scripts during its long written history. The one currently in use first began to emerge in the ninth century, and is known as მხედრული *mkhedruli* 'military'. It comprises 33 letters (reduced from an earlier total of 38). Words are written as they sound, and sound as they are written. There is no equivalent of the capital letters of the Latin alphabet.
- The earliest extant Georgian inscriptions date from the fifth century, manuscripts survive from the seventh century, while the first Georgian book was printed in the seventeenth century.
- The endings of Georgian surnames indicate which area of the country they first originated. Some common terminations are -შვილი *-shvili*, -ძე *-dze*, -ია *-ia*, -იანი *-iani* and -ავა *-ava*.
- Certain common greetings reflect the troubled history of the Georgians: დილა მშვიდობისა *dila mshvidobisa* 'morning of peace' = good morning!, გამარჯობა *gamarjoba* 'victory' = hello!, გაგიმარჯოს *gagimarjos* 'may you be victorious' = your health!.
- Georgian possesses an extensive literature and a wealth of folk poetry, and is the language of the country's renowned polyphonic singing tradition. A recording of one such Georgian song is now exiting the solar system aboard the Voyager spacecraft as an example of mankind's cultural achievements.