

The Speech Community of Ponape, Caroline Islands

J. L. Fischer

Tulane University

This paper¹ discusses the linguistic resources of the speech community of Ponape in the eastern Caroline Islands in relation to social structure. By "linguistic resources" is meant the languages used, differences in local dialects, styles, and levels of politeness in some of these, and the use of supplementary means of communication such as writing and radio. The main emphasis in the paper, however, is on the pre-contact speech community in so far as it can be inferred from historical records, traditions, and contemporary speech behavior of the ethnic Ponapean residents.

The island of Ponape is one of only five high island groups in the Carolines. The nearest high island groups are Kusaie, about two hundred miles to the east, and Truk, nearly four hundred miles to the west. Two atolls, Mokil and Pingelap, lie between Ponape and Kusaie, and another, Ngatik, is found to the southwest of Ponape. Each of these three atolls speaks a distinctive language, or dialect fairly closely related to Ponapean, but not immediately mutually intelligible with it. The languages of Truk and Kusaie, the nearest high islands, are quite distinct from Ponapean, although related. Of the two, Trukese appears to be the closer.

The island of Ponape is mountainous with a maximum height of about 2,500 feet.² It is roughly round with a maximum diameter of about twelve miles. Streams draining from the rainy center of the island have eroded a number of sizable valleys, and subsidence of the land has produced several estuaries leading toward the interior, and isolated some of the coastal hills as offshore islands. Ponape and the offshore high islands are surrounded by a barrier reef which leaves a relatively quiet lagoon around most of the island, although there is one stretch on the southeast side where the outer reef touches the shore and cuts off the lagoon. Small canoes can pass this place, if they wait for high tide and are familiar with the boulders, but some