

THE CAROLINE ISLANDS SCRIPT: A LINGUISTIC CONFRONTATION

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The Caroline Islands are located in the Federated States of Micronesia in the western Pacific Ocean. According to Sohn (1975), the Caroline Islands refer to the islands of Woleai Atoll, Ulithi, Fais, Sorol, Eauripik, Faraulep, Ifaluk, Elato, Puluwat, Lamotrek and Satawal. These are also known as the Outer Islands of the Western Carolines. “Outer” specifies their distance from Yap, the center of the traditional hegemony as well as the present administration.

Woleaian is spoken with dialectal differences on Woleai, Eauripik, Faraulep, Elato, Lamotrek, Puluwat, Satawal and Ifaluk. It is on this group of islands that the Caroline Islands script was found. For reasons of convenience Riesenberg & Kaneshiro’s (1960) term ‘Caroline Islands script’ is used and the islands and the language are referred to as the Woleai group and the Woleai language. In 1975, there were approximately 1,500 speakers of Woleai on the various islands. Similar to Trukese and Ulithian, the language can be classified as a member of the Trukic subgroup of the Micronesian group of the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian language family.

The invention of the Caroline Islands script at the beginning of the twentieth century and the subsequent dismissal of the script by linguists in the latter half of that century illustrate a conflicting view on the usefulness of this script that was dominated by linguists rather than the users of the script. Linguists have contrasted the script to a phoneme inventory but their conclusions depended on the adequacy of the phonological analysis that they provided.

In 1909 the Hamburg Südsee Expedition visited Woleai. Their ethnographic work was not published until 1929 and later – so late, that one of the principal ethnographers, Sarfert, had died just before the 1938 publication of his work. Damm & Sarfert (1935) describe examples of the script from both Ifaluk and Faraulep.

During a brief visit shortly after the Hamburg expedition, Brown (1914) collected a series of characters but, according to Riesenberg & Kaneshiro (1960: 276), he did not collect the complete set. Few others

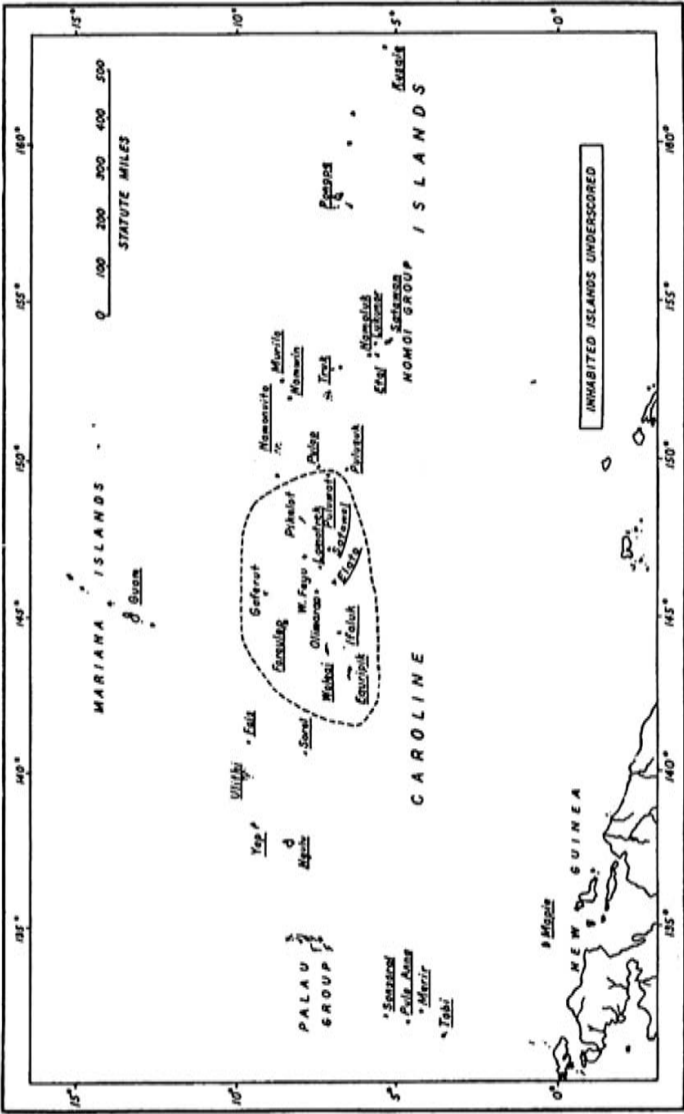


Figure 1. Map of the Caroline Islands. Encircled is the Woleai group, where the Caroline Islands script was found.