

THE LANGUAGE OF SONSOROL

INTRODUCTION

The Language called in the following pages "Sonsorol" is one of four dialects spoken on the four small islands commonly grouped as the Sonsorol Group, situated to the south-west of the Palau Islands, in the south-western corner of Micronesia. They form the western outpost of Micronesia, as far as the affiliations of people and language are concerned. The four islands are closely related, and bear a fairly close resemblance in language also to Ulithi, and rather less to Truk and the Central Carolines. The language of all these groups forms together one sub-group of the Micronesian languages. With the languages of eastern Micronesia the relationship is less intimate.

The four islands are named as follows, the correct native term being given opposite to the commonly accepted European term, in a phonetic script which is explained in the opening section of this Grammar. They are:

<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Native Name</u>
Sonsorol	Doŋo'sa:ru
Pul, Pulo Ana	Pu:r
Merir	Me'lel
Tobi	'Toŷovei.

The populations are small, and apparently are still on the wane. The islands form part of the American Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, but formerly, from 1914 to 1944, they were part of the Japanese Mandated Territory. Previous influence was chiefly German. The remarkable thing, however, is that whereas foreign words introduced into Palau are mostly Spanish or German, those introduced into Sonsorol are mostly English.

The islands are coral atolls, but phosphate is found on Merir and Tobi, and was worked by the Japanese. The population began to fall off rapidly as the result of an influenza epidemic in the previous period of German Government. The Germans moved a large part of the population to Palau, settling some on Angaur and some near Koror. The former settlement no longer exists; the latter is still near Koror, but many of the natives have now returned to their own islands. It is chiefly Pul that has been affected by this migration of inhabitants. One result of the move, which directly concerns the present work, is undoubtedly a tendency for the four dialects to mingle, or rather, three of them, for Tobi has more marked peculiarities of pronunciation and vocabulary.

The only work on these islands hitherto published is the volume and a half in the publications of the Hamburg Thilenius Expedition of 1908-10. The following is the title of the work in question: Ergebnisse der Südsee Expedition, 1908-10, herausgegeben von Dr. G. Thilenius: II. Ethnographie: B. Mikronesien, Band 9: Dr. Anneliese Eilers: West Karolinen. The first "Halbband" takes in Sonsorol Pul and Merir, the first part of the second "Halbband" covers Tobi. Considerable bodies of vocabulary and song-texts are given in these volumes, and some notes on grammar, but there is no formal linguistic study. For reasons that will be explained, only partial use has been made of them in the present study.

This study was carried out by the writer under the auspices of the "Coördinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology", sponsored by the American Navy in conjunction with the Pacific Science Board of the American National Research Council in the first part of 1948. At the last moment it proved to be impossible to obtain transport to the islands themselves, and so the entire study had to be carried out with

members of the various island groups resident at Koror, the capital of the Palau Islands. Each island was represented among the number. As remarked, however, this mixing of the populations has without doubt led to a curtailment of dialectic differences, especially in the younger generation, which has never lived on its home islands. Consequently, Eilers' work has been used to provide material that can definitely be assigned to either Pul or Merir. At the same time, and this is important, Eilers' party did not make a particular study of the language, and their phonetics in many instances leave much to be desired. For this reason it has seemed unwise to let any point depend on Eilers alone. In the vocabulary, therefore, words taken from the work of the Hamburg Expedition are marked with (H) as a sign that the present writer did not collect the word in question. It has been possible to include in this way much vocabulary relating to the local culture which could not have been obtained at Koror, where the conditions under which the people live tend to orientate them away from their true culture.

Information was collected largely through the medium of Japanese, which the Sonsorol people at Koror speak fluently. Much use also was made of their knowledge of the Palau language. In particular, the working through with them of the large collection of sentences at the end of Bishop Walleser's Palau Wörterbuch provided a large amount of valuable material, which is included in this volume with other materials as specimens of the language in consecutive texts, as it is now spoken at Koror. Furthermore, some of the information was obtained through English. A number of the Koror Sonsorols speak good English, as well as Japanese, Palau and their own tongue. They show a high standard of intelligence. The chief of Sonsorol was also present in

Koror Hospital during the time of the investigation, and helped considerably, although he does not speak even Japanese and had to have everything interpreted to him. It was intended that material for a study of the interesting intonational system should be obtained also, but the breakdown of a wire recorder at a critical moment prevented this, much to the author's regret.

Sonsorol has been a Roman Catholic Mission area for a considerable number of years, and the only published work in the language is a Catechism. The spelling of this is based on Spanish and is very inaccurate. The work therefore provided only a jumping-off point for seeking further information. A native named Santiago, however, rendered excellent service in the later stages of the study, especially in phonetics. A Sonsorol-Chamorro mixture, he was able, after being shown the author's phonetic system, to write texts in his own language without further assistance, and in many instances the occurrences of mixed vowels, especially a final u, has been accepted from his spelling. Unfortunately he was not available in the earlier stages.
