

Split ergativity and Subject in Bribri

Margaret Dickeman Datz

Universidad de Costa Rica

0. In the present study I examine evidence from simple and complex Bribri sentences, first, to show that split ergativity exists in this language and, second, to present some problems which confront any attempt to define 'subject' in a grammar of Bribri.

Ergativity has commonly been defined in relation to transitivity, with the ergative case encoding the agent (or other directly-related case) of a verb which in addition requires at least an object. The absolutive case encodes the object of a transitive verb and the single argument (agent or object) of an intransitive verb.

The basic Bribri sentence consists of either

1. an intransitive verb with either a deep semantic agent or object as its unique required argument. In surface structure this noun phrase has \emptyset marking and immediately precedes the verb.
- or
2. a transitive verb with two or more obligatory arguments, which may occur only in the following combinations of deep (semantic) cases (Villalobos, mimeo: 5):

Ag (agent)	-	0 (object)
Ex (experiencer)	-	0
B (benefactive)	-	0
Ag -		Ex
Ag -		B
Ag -	Ex -	0
Ag -	B -	0

Although a deep locative case appears to be required by certain

verbs, it does not play a role in determining syntactic transitivity: Ag and 0, even where L is the second required case, are nevertheless marked \emptyset , as with intransitive verbs.

One of the two or more obligatory arguments of the set 0, Ag, Ex, B is marked with the postpositional tö in accordance with the hierarchy Ag $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Ex} \\ \text{B} \end{array} \right\}$ (where Ex and B never co-occur). Thus, if Ag is present, it is marked with tö; if not, either Ex or B is so marked. A second argument is marked \emptyset in accordance with the hierarchy 0 $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Ex} \\ \text{B} \end{array} \right\}$ (where Ex and B never co-occur). Thus, if 0 is present it is marked \emptyset ; if not, either Ex or B is so marked. Where three obligatory arguments are present, the third (never marked with either tö or \emptyset) will always be either Ex or B; it is marked with a. Other postpositional markers in Bribri mark NPs with an oblique relation to the verb. On the basis of this NP marking transitivity can be defined in terms of the verb requiring at least two arguments or NPs, marked tö and \emptyset .

On the basis of this case marking Bribri has been classified as an ergative language, and, indeed, NP marking in Bribri does involve a set of rules which apply on the basis of a distinction between two classes, determined, as indicated above, in part by deep structure semantic cases and in part by co-occurrence with other cases. We may call these classes ergative and absolutive in the sense that one obligatory NP of a transitive verb will always be marked \emptyset in the surface structure, as will the unique obligatory NP of an intransitive verb; this class may be called "absolutive". And a second obligatory NP of a transitive verb will always be marked tö; this class may be called "ergative". However, it is worth noting that the deep semantic cases which make up the "absolutive" class are to some degree different: for

transitive verbs: $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Ex} \\ \text{B} \end{array} \right\}$, 0; for intransitive verbs: $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Ag} \\ 0 \end{array} \right\}$. Thus, Ex

