# Information structure in Teribe (Chibchan)

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(in collaboration with project D2 „Typology of Information Structure")

## 1. Object language

One of the 15 currently living Chibchan languages (spreading from Northeastern Honduras, through the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, most of Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, to the West of Venezuela), Teribe is spoken by some 2,000 people in the province of Bocas del Toro, in Northwestern Panama, and by 6 people –all born and raised in Panama- in Costa Rica. The data were elicited in January 2006 in Costa Rica; the participants are all adults speakers of the language, with ages ranging from 30 to 50.
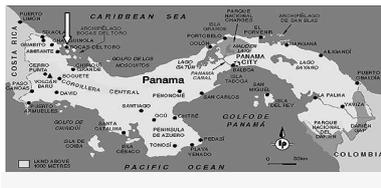


Fig. 1 Panama

## 2. Information Structure

MARKERS OF INFORMATION-STRUCTURE STATUS
In addition to unmarked mechanisms such as unmarked word orders and zero anaphora, the language has four markers of information-structure status:

- the topic marker *li*,
- the focus marker *omgo*,
- the contrastive focus marker *ra*,
- and a rather interesting focus marker, *om*, whose role is to keep a newly activated participant as new until it either disappears or becomes established as a new topic.

These markers combine with word order to create a wealth of foregrounding structures, similar in function to mechanisms such as passives, clefts or left/right dislocations in other languages.

WORD ORDER
SOV order is used discourse-initially to ground participants, and to reinforce their identity in some discourse passages; there is a tendency for participants to appear as full noun phrases in this order.

The more frequent OV-s order, where -s stands for a person-indexing suffix, is used for running discourse.

In principle, the SOV order excludes the indexing of the subject and the OV-s does not allow the presence of a free subject noun phrase. Both orders can be regarded as being in complementary distribution. As for intransitive clauses, the discourse equivalent of the SOV order is SV, while the intransitive counterpart of OV-s is ØV (5).

INVERSION
The inverse construction is characterized by
a) word order inversion (OVS*dë*), where S is a full noun phrase and the object of the clause remains in its preverbal position;
b) aspectual marking with agreement in some cases but not in others, but with a finite verb form in all cases; and,
c) direct marking on the obviate NP (*dë*), which is a pragmatic type of inversion.

## 4. References
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Quesada, J. Diego. 2000a. *A Grammar of Teribe*. Munich: Lincom-Europa.
Quesada, J. Diego. 2000b."Word order, participant-encoding and the alleged ergativity in Teribe". *International Journal of American Linguistics (IJAL)*: 66 (1): 98-124.

## 3. Empirical observations

Of interest for the objectives of D2 are the inversion construction and the role of **obviative NPs**, especially in comparison with the function of passive sentences in languages like English and German.

The Teribe informants produced these structures in the elicitation task "Visibility", where the patient is given and the agent new. The following example is an illustration of the discourse function of this construction:

(1)
| kwozir-wa | dulas jek | zron pang | kl-ara. |
|---|---|---|---|
| child-DIM | boy go | run hang | CLF.ANIMATE-one |

| kwozir-wa | jek | zron pang | kl-ara |
|---|---|---|---|
| child-DIM | go | run hang | CLF.ANIMATE-one |

| li | ta-kz-a | ba | klara dë |
|---|---|---|---|
| REL | kick-SUD-3.SG | 3.SG.POSS | mate OBV |

'A little boy is running. The boy who was running was suddenly kicked by his mate.'

In contrast, in the conditions, in which the patient is new and the agent is given, there is no inversion.

It is therefore important to search for contexts in which Teribe uses inversion, but German or English reject it. One such context is that of cases in which the agent is the questioned information; this becomes apparent in the experiment "Anima":

> where the agent is questioned, with either a wh-question or an alternative question ('the man or the woman'), the informants produce inverted replies.

(2)
| kok | pansho | komo | ara | shko |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| place | cloud | up | many | in |
| ga e | ëye | shäng | yuk | ïk |
| and that | who | stand | lamp | see |
| yuk ïk | shäng | domer | dë | |
| lamp see | stand | man | OBV | |

'There where there are many clouds high up, who is looking at the lamp? The lamp, the man sees it.'

In these discourse conditions, no passive is possible. This leads to the conclusion that in both English and German passive is used when the *patient* is *given* information (not the whole VP), whereas in Teribe the inversion construction is used when the *agent* is *new*, or has at least recently become new in discourse, as it is possible to encounter inverted constructions with the obviative NP marked with the topic marker *li*. In cases in which the agent is new and the VP is given, Teribe prefers the inversion construction, whereas both English and German use active (non-passive) sentences. In such cases the tendency in English is to use cleft constructions.

Although the inversion construction resembles a passive, two arguments speak against analyzing it as such.

1. patient suppression is far more common than agent suppression;
2. the grammatical relations in the inversion construction remain unaltered (the postverbal NP is subject and the preverbal NP is the object); there is no promotion to subjecthood.

Finally, it should be mentioned that use of the information-structure markers is to a large extent speaker-based, which makes them rather unpredictable.

Generalizations as to what constructions to expect in which contexts can be readily made on the bases of word order rather than on the use of the markers per se.

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