

# Clause types and Ergativity in Suyá (Jê)

Dr. Ulla Wieseemann and Ruth Thomson

Introduction .....	2
Basic elements of clauses.....	2
Clause types.....	3
Clause Type I .....	4
Clause Type II.....	6
Clause Type III .....	7
Clause Type IV .....	9
Clause Type V.....	10
Clause Type VI .....	11
Tables.....	13
Table of Clause Types with Examples .....	13
Table of Clause Formulas.....	14
Conclusion.....	15
Bibliography .....	16

## Introduction

In this paper we aim to show the relationship between the clause constructions, the verb types that occur as predicates in each and the pronouns used in subject, object and circumstance functions.

We will show that the set used for object pronouns in a transitive clause is the same as that used as subject in an intransitive clause, and hence we have ergativity. In order to show this we present all the 6 clause types that exist in Suyá and essentially how they are composed, keeping to a minimum of complexity. The verbs that occur as predicates in these constructions fall into five classes. What would be the sixth class actually is a subclass of 2 plus a subclass of 3, making it class 2/3.

The grammar of Suyá, like other Jê languages, exhibits both ergative and non-ergative structures, the former of which have been mentioned or described for several<sup>1</sup> of them.

## Basic elements of clauses

Throughout this paper the following abbreviations are used:

C = Circumstance consists of

- a) a time or location word in its simplest form, or
- b) a noun or pronoun followed by a postposition indicating time, location, purpose, benefit, and others, or
- c) in its most complex form, another included clause in the descriptive voice, followed by a postposition.

Its position in the clause is free, coming either before or after the free S. For the purposes of this paper, we are limiting our data to the common form, consisting of a noun or pronoun followed by a postposition.

O = Object of a transitive clause. This consists of a noun or a bound pronoun or even an included clause.

P = Predicate of the clause, normally the verb or verb phrase. In other constructions, not treated in this paper, the predicate can be a noun.

S = Subject of the clause, consisting of a pronoun or a noun.

V = Verb

# = Zero morpheme (member of pronoun sets A and C denoting 3rd person singular)

V+ = denotes a verb phrase, consisting of a negative, a certain set of verbs, or a postpositional denoting future, purpose and the like.

( ) = indicates that the function is optional in the clause construction.

In the pronominal system, four persons are distinguished: speaker (first person), spoken to (second person), spoken about (third person) as well as a combination of speaker and spoken to (first and second person) which is a kind of dual commonly referred to as inclusive, presented in this paper as fourth person. The examples below will be limited to the sets of non-plural pronouns.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Silva, Maria Amélia Reis, 2003, "Pronomes, Ordem e Ergatividade em Mebengokre (Kayapó)"; Urban, Greg, 1985, "Ergativity and accusativity in Shokleng (Gê)." In: IJAL 51 No.2, April 1985.

There are 3 sets of these pronouns. In this paper we will discuss the function of these sets interacting with the verbs in relation to ergativity. It is interesting to note that the SetC pronouns are also used with obligatorily possessed nouns.

Table 1 Pronominal sets

		<b>setA</b>	<b>setB</b>	<b>setC</b>
1	I	wa	ire	i-
2	you	ka	kare	a-
3	(s)he, it	#	kôt/kôre	#
4 inclusive	you & I	ku	ware	wa-

**setA** – free subject pronouns, nominative case, active voice

**setB** – free subject pronouns, nominative case, descriptive voice

**setC** – bound subject/object pronouns absolutive case (ergative system), descriptive voice, in certain constructions also used in active voice. Also used in C constructions.

Since the 3<sup>rd</sup> persons in setA and C are # rather than an overt form, the examples in this paper are featuring mainly 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons.

## Clause types

There are 6 classes of verbs which function as the predicate in 6 different types of clauses, so that every clause type has its own predicate different from all the others. The traditional difference between transitive and intransitive verbs and clause types are apparent in some constructions, but the situation is so complex that we prefer to not use this terminology. We give numbers to the various types and present the essential elements of their structure. We also decided to stick to small constructions, not showing the full complexity of possible non-obligatory elements in the clauses. There may be up to three S in the same clause, all having the same referent, and an unspecified number of optional C.

Verbs occur in two basic voices, active and descriptive. Some verbs have separate verb stems for each of these, others have only one stem for both, but the combination possibilities of the elements in the clause are different. For this reason the difference is also seen on clause level and will be presented as such. Active voice is characterized by the verb occurring without any modification such as negation, a restricted set of verbs, (mainly position and motion) or postpositions denoting future, intention, purpose, cause, benefit, and its opposite. The presence of these elements trigger the descriptive voice.

## Clause Type I

What might be called the transitive clause, called type I in this paper, is characterized by the following elements in the order in which they are presented:

S (C) O- -P

S O and P are obligatory, (C) is optional.

S pronouns are setA in active and setB in descriptive constructions. Though obligatory in principle, they may be left understood in a text until the agent is changed, which is a typical case of switch reference as described for proto-Jê languages<sup>2</sup>.

O pronouns are setC, that is, bound to the verb.

C is optional, and there may be up to three in one clause. It may precede and/or follow any free S, that is setA or B, but never follow the setC which is a prefix to the verb.

P is a class 1 (transitive) verb, in active or descriptive voice.

Ex: active /ti/ 'put'      descriptive: /tir/ 'put'  
           /ngõ/ 'give'                /jõr/ 'give'  
           /thithik/ 'beat'            /thithik/ 'beat'

In the active construction the above formula is expanded to:

S:setA (C) O:setC P:V1

In the descriptive construction it is expanded to:

S:setB (C) O:setC P:V1 phrase

Examples below 1 – 3 are active, while examples 4 – 6 are descriptive constructions.

**ex.1** /Wa amä whĩkhàkhäm ngwỳj ti./ 'I'll put the pot in the car for you.'

S	C	C	O	P
Wa	a-mä	whĩkhà-khäm	ngwỳj	ti.
I	you-to	car-in	pot	put
setA	setC			

<sup>2</sup> See Wieseemann, Ursula, "Macro-Jê Pronouns" and "Grammaticalized Coreference", both in Wieseemann, U (ed.) 1986 *Pronominal Systems*. CONTINUUM 5, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, as well as Popovich, Harold "The Nominal Reference System of Maxakalí" in the same volume. In this volume ergativity is mentioned for the Jê and Macro-Jê languages presented but is not explicitly discussed.

**ex.2** /Wa athithik./ 'I'll beat you.'

S	O-P
Wa	a-thithik.
I	you-beat
setA	setC

Note that what in a European language would be an indirect object is a circumstance in Suyá. For example:

**ex.3** /Wa amä ngwỳj ngõ./ 'I'll give you a pot.'

S	C	O	P
Wa	a-mä	ngwỳj	ngõ.
I	you-to	pot	give
setA	setC		

Note that the /wa/ 'I' in ex 1,2,3 above is the free subject pronoun, setA, nominative case, of the transitive verb.

**ex.4** /Ire amä whìkhàkhäm ngwỳj tir kjêr./ 'I didn't put the pot in the car for you.'

S	C	C	O	P	
Ire	a-mä	whìkhà-khäm	ngwỳj	tir	kjêr.
I	you-to	car-in	pot	put	not
setB	setC				

**ex.5** /Ire athithik kjêr./ 'I didn't beat you.'

S	O-P	
Ire	a-thithik	kjêr.
I	you-beat	not
setB	setC	

**ex.6** /Ire amä ngwỳj jōr kjêr./ 'I didn't give you a pot.'

S	C	O	P	
Ire	a-mä	ngwỳj	jōr	kjêr.
I	you-to	pot	give	not
setB	setC			

Note that the /ire/ 'I' in ex 4,5,6 is the free subject pronoun (setB), transitive verb, in descriptive voice.

## Clause Type II

What might be called an intransitive clause, type II is characterized by the following structure:

(C) S P

S and P are obligatory, there cannot be O.

S is similar to that described above for Type I, employing setA in the active voice, and with the same switch reference characteristics. However in the descriptive voice of Clause Type II, setC is employed (bound to the verb).

The optional C is as described for type I. It may also follow the S.

P is a class 2 (intransitive) verb, in active or descriptive voice:

Ex:

active	descriptive
/mō/ 'go, plural'	/mōr/ 'go, plural'
/pỳj/ 'arrive'	/pôt/ 'arrive'
/rit/ 'look at'	/rit/ 'look at'

Verb class 2 is a large class and includes such common verbs as 'go', 'sleep', 'sit', 'lie down', 'stand', etc.

In the active construction the above formula is expanded to:

(C) S:setA P:V2

C	S	P	
/Akamàt-khām	wa	ngõr./	'At night, I'll sleep.'
night-in	I	sleep	

In the descriptive construction it is expanded to:

(C) S:setC- -P:V2 phrase

C	S-P	
/Akamàt-khām i-jõn	kjêr./	At night I didn't sleep.
night-in I-sleep	not	

Examples:

**ex.7** /Wa ngõr./ 'I'll sleep.' (active)

S	P
wa	ngõr
I	sleep

setA

ex.8 /Ijõn kjêr./ 'I didn't sleep.' (descriptive)

S-P

i-jõn            kjêr.

I-sleep        not

setC

ex.9 /Wa thê./ 'I go.' (active)

S     P

wa    thê

I     go

setA

ex.10 /Ithêm kjêr./ 'I didn't go.' (descriptive)

S-P

i-thêm kjêr

I-go    not

setC

Note the setA pronouns as S in the active case of the intransitive verb, and setC (bound) pronouns as S in the descriptive voice of the verb.

### **Clause Type III**

The elements in this clause type are:

(S) (C) S- -P

If the optional subject is a pronoun, the free pronoun setA is used. The occurrence of the optional (S) is probably obeying the switch reference rules, though maybe not entirely. Other factors may be: when there are circumstance phrases coming before the predicate, as in example 12, or when the verb is standing alone and needs an extra subject to make the clause more complete, as in example 15.

The only obligatory elements are the bound subject (setC) and P.

C is optional and if present, it is of the kind described for clause type I.

The obligatory subject S- consists of setC prefixed to the verb, in both the active and the descriptive voices.

With the exception of a few, the verbs that comprise verb class 3 are what in a European language might be classed as adjectives, such as 'young', 'happy', 'sad', 'angry', 'old', 'hot', etc. The active and descriptive voices of most, but not all, class 3 verbs are identical, the only

distinguishing feature being the occurrence of simple verbs in active voice over against verb phrases in descriptive voice. This might be accompanied by a stem change.

In the active construction the above formula is expanded to:

(S:setA) (C) S-:setC –P:v3

In the descriptive construction the formula is expanded to:

(S:setA) (C) S-:setC –P:v3 phrase

Examples:

Examples 11 to 14 are of verbs that do not change the verb stem in the active and descriptive voices. Examples 15 and 16 show a verb that does have a stem change.

**ex.11** /Ikĩn kumẽn./ 'I'm very happy.'

S-P	
i-kĩn	kumẽn
I-happy	very
setC	

**ex.12** /Wa akhãm ikĩn./ 'I'm pleased with you.'

S	C	S-P
wa	a-khãm	i-kĩn
I	you-in	I-like
setA	setC	setC

**ex.13** /Itũm./ 'I'm old.'

S-P
i-tũm
I-old
setC

**ex.14** /Itũm kjêr./ 'I'm not old.'

S-P
i-tũm kjêr
I-old not
setC

**ex.15** /(Wa) i-katho./ 'I'll go out.'

S	S-P
wa	i-katho
I	I-go out

setA setC

ex.16 /Wa akamàtkhäm ikathor kjêr./ 'I didn't go out at night.'

S	C	S-P
wa	akamàt-khäm	i-kathor kjêr
I	night-in	I go out not
setA		setC

### Clause Type IV

The elements in this clause type are:

(S)(C) C = S P

If the optional pronoun subject occurs, it is the free pronoun of setA, and agrees with the logical subject which is C = S, that is, it has the same referent.

C in this clause type is obligatory, taking the setC pronouns bound to the postposition /mä/ 'to' and acts as the logical, obligatory subject. In addition to the obligatory C there may be several optional ones.

P consists of class 4 verbs which include verbs of state like 'to be hungry', 'to be thirsty', 'to be cold', etc. The only formal difference between active and descriptive voices is the presence and absence of a verb phrase.

In the active construction the above formula expands to:

(S:setA) C = S P:V class 4

In the descriptive construction it expands to:

(S:setA) C = S P:V class 4 phrase

ex.17 /Imä khôr./ 'I'm thirsty.'

(S)	C = S	P
(Wa)	i-mä	khôr
(I)	me-to	thirsty
(setA)	setC	

ex.18 /Imä khôr kjêr./ 'I'm not thirsty.'

C = S	P
i-mä	khôr kjêr
me-to	thirsty not
setC	

**ex.19** /Imä hräm./ 'I'm hungry.'

C	P	
i-mä	hräm	
me-to	hungry	
setC		

**ex.20** /Imä hräm kjêr./ 'I'm not hungry.'

C	P		
i-mä	hräm		kjêr
me-to	hungry		not
setC			

### **Clause Type V**

The elements in this clause type are:

(S) (C) C = S O- -P

The optional pronoun subject, when it occurs, is manifested by setA pronouns and agrees in person with the logical subject, which is C = S.

As in the clause type IV, the obligatory circumstance C takes the setC pronouns bound to the postposition /mä/ 'to' and has the function of a logical subject.

Clause type V shares with clause type I the obligatory O, which is a noun or the bound pronoun setC prefixed to the verb. This feature distinguishes Type V from Type IV. This bound pronoun object does not agree in person with C = S.

Although similar in construction to clause type IV, the P of type V consists of verbs of emotion which must take an object and so form their own verb class, class 5.

Some of the verbs of Class 5 are the same as those belonging to Class 3, but the meaning is different. Example 21 shows this; the verb is homophonous with that of class 3, but the constructions and meanings are different.

The verb stems of the active and descriptive voices are identical and so the only distinguishing feature between them is the fact that the predicate is a verb phrase instead of just the verb stem.

In the active construction the above formula expands to:

(S:setA) (C) C = S O-:setC -P:V class 5

In the descriptive construction it expands to:

(S:setA) (C) C = S O-:setC -P:V class 5 phrase

**ex.21a** /Imä akĩn./ 'I like you.'

(S)	C = S	O-P
(Wa)	i-mä	a-kĩn
(I)	me-to	you-like
(setA)	setC	setC
(I)	me-to	you-like

**ex.21b** /Imä akĩn kumẽn./ 'I really like you.'

(S)	C = S	O-P
(Wa)	i-mä	a-kĩn kumẽn
(I)	me-to	you-like really
(setA)	setC	setC
(I)	me-to	you-like really

**ex.22a** /Imä kĩn./ 'I like it.'

C = S	O-P
i-mä	kĩn
me-to	like
setC	setC (third person, # morpheme)

**ex.22b** /Imä kĩn kjêr./ 'I don't like it.'

C = S	O-P
i-mä	kĩn kjêr
me-to	like not
setC	setC (third person, # morph)

**ex.23a** /Imä akhurê/ 'I hate you.'

C = S	O-P
i-mä	a-khurê
me-to	you-hate
setC	setC

**ex.23b** /Imä akhurê kumẽn/ 'I really hate you.'

C = S	O-P
i-mä	a-khurê kumẽn
me-to	you-hate really
setC	setC

## Clause Type VI

The elements of clause type VI are quite different in active and descriptive voice:

Active voice: S (C) C = O P Descriptive voice: S (C) C = O S- -P

Expanded formulas: active S:setA (C) C = O P v2/3  
Descriptive S:setB (C) C = O S-:setC -P v2/3 phrase

S is obligatory and takes setA free pronouns in the active voice. In the descriptive voice the free subject pronouns are setB which obligatorily cooccurs with a bound S:setC. Neither concord with the obligatory C = O.

The C = O is obligatory and consist of a noun or a pronoun setC bound to the postpositional -ro<sup>3</sup>. It is the logical O of the clause. There may be several optional C constructions.

<sup>3</sup> -ro 'with' has allomorphs /-no/ following nasal consonants, /-to/ following stops and /j/, and /-tho/ when by itself.

The P consists of a selection of verbs from class 2 or class 3, together forming a new class 2/3, verbs like 'go', 'go around', 'go out', 'sit', 'stand', etc.

In other words, this type of clause takes on both the features of clause type I (transitive) and type II (intransitive), as is shown by the fact that it uses the free subject in the active voice, and both sets, B and C sets, agreeing in person with each other, in the descriptive voice.

**ex.21** /Wa aro thē./ 'I'll take you.'

S	C	P
wa	a-ro	thē
I	you-with	go
setA	setC	

**ex. 22** /Ire aro ithēm kjêr./ 'I won't take you.'

S	C	P
ire	a-ro	i-thēm kjêr
I	you-with	I-go not
setB	setC	setC

**ex.23** /Wa aro ikatho./ 'I brought you out.'

S	C	P
wa	a-ro	i-katho
I	you-with	I-go out
setA	setC	setC

## Tables

### Table of Clause Types with Examples

Note that in this table we have used the obligatory elements only.

Table 2 Clause types

Active Voice	Descriptive Voice
Type I S O- -P Wa a-thithik. 'I'll beat you.' I you-beat setA setC	S O- -P Ire a-thithik kjêr. 'I didn't beat you.' I you-beat not setB setC
Type II S P wa ngõr 'I'll sleep.' I sleep setA	S- -P i-jõn kjêr. 'I didn't sleep.' I-sleep not setC
Type III S- -P i-kĩn 'I'm happy.' I-happy setC	S- -P i-kĩn kumẽn 'I'm very happy.' I-happy very setC
Type IV C=S P i-mä hräm 'I'm hungry.' me-to hungry setC	C=S P i-mä hräm kjêr 'I'm not hungry.' me-to hungry not setC
Type V C=S O- -P i-mä a-khurê 'I hate you.' me-to you-hate setC setC	C=S O- -P i-mä a-khurê kjêr 'I don't hate you.' me-to you-hate not setC setC
Type VI S C=O P wa a-ro thẽ 'I'll take you.' I you-with go setA setC	S C=O S- -P ire a-ro i-thẽm kjêr 'I'll not take you.' I you-with I-go not setB setC setC

### **Table of Clause Formulas**

In Table 3 we show the formulas for active and descriptive clauses of each of the six types.

Abbreviations used in this table:

O-, S-	the pronoun object or subject is bound to the predicate.
tran	transitive verb
int.	intransitive verb
Cl.	Clause
v	verb
*	these two agree in person

Table 3 Clause Formulas

<b>Clause Type</b>	<b>Active Voice</b>	<b>Descriptive Voice</b>
I	S (C) O- -P setA setC setC V1	S (C) O- -P setB setC setC- V1 +
II	S (C) P setA setC V2	(S)* (C) *S- -P setA setC setC-V2 +
III	(S)* (C) *S- -P setA setC setC V3	(S)* (C) *S- -P setA setC setC V3 +
IV	(S)* *C=S P setA setC-mä V4	(S)* *C=S P setA setC V4 +
V	(S)* *C=S O- -P setA setC-mä setC-V5	(S)* *C=S O- -P setA setC-mä setC-V5 +
VI	S (C) C=O P setA setC setC-ro V2/3	S* (C) C *S- -P setB setC setC-ro setC-V2/3 +

Note that although one can have a C and an O slot in Type I clauses, one would not get two sets of C pronouns together. One of the slots would be filled by a noun and the other by a pronoun. The same holds true of Type VI clauses where one can have an optional and an obligatory C slot coming together. Again, one of the slots would be filled by a noun and the other by a pronoun.

## Conclusion

As has become apparent, setA and setB are both nominative case, occurring the S function only, in both transitive and intransitive constructions. SetC however occurs in O function in the transitive clause types I and V and in S-function in all the other clause types. This is the typical characteristic of an ergative/absolute set. It also occurs in the C=S and C=O functions, though one would expect that, since C always occurs with setC.

So there is ergativity involved, though not in the classical sense in which ergative case is associated with the S of a transitive clause marked differently from the S in the intransitive clause, and the absolute case with the O of the transitive construction being marked the same as the S in the intransitive constructions.

It has also become apparent that the whole notion of transitivity is problematic in Suya, which is why we have decided to give numbers to the clause types instead. Such fuzziness can develop in a language precisely because there is one free set of pronouns that is always used for S and another set that is always bound to P, whether in O or in S function. In fact it was difficult to decide what kind of structure clause types III, IV, V and VI really have. The deciding factor was the agreement or non-agreement between the free sets(A and B) and bound set(C). This also was the reason why the unusual C=S and C=O functions could be recognized.

An alternative way of looking at the system would be to speak of active versus descriptive clauses. That would allow us to describe the system as a mark of these clause types. Note that the SetA pronouns are optional in all active formulas except those of Types I, II and VI. In Type III, IV and V the difference between active and descriptive is marked only in the form of the predicate.

## Bibliography

- Abraham, Werner, Talmy Givon, and Sandra Thompson (editor). 1995. *Discourse grammar and typology*. Papers in honour of John W. M. Verhaar. Studies in Language Companion Series. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Arruda Câmara Cabral, Ana Suelly e Dall'Igna Rodrigues, Aryon (organizadores). 2001. *Estudos sobre línguas indígenas I*. Belem: UFPA.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1989. *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*, second edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 1979. "Ergativity." *Language* 55:59-138.
- Givón, T. 1979. *On Understanding Grammar*. New York: Academic Press.
- Popovich, Harold. 1986. "The Nominal Reference System of Maxacalí. In: U. Wieseemann (editor) *Pronominal Systems*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag: 351-358.
- Silva, Maria Amélia Reis, 2003, "Pronomes, Ordem e Ergatividade em Mebengokre (Kayapó)"
- Urban, Greg, 1985, "Ergativity and accusativity in Shokleng (Gê)." In: *IJAL* 51 No.2, April 1985.
- Van Valin, Jr., Robert D. 2001. *An Introduction to Syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Valin, Jr., Robert D. 2005. *Exploring the Syntax-Semantics Interface*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Whaley, Lindsay J. 1997. *Introduction to Typology The Unity and Diversity of Language*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Wieseemann, Ursula. 1972. *Die phonologische und grammatische Struktur der Kaingáng-Sprache*. *Janua Linguarum, series practica* 90. The Hague: Mouton.
- Wieseemann, Ursula. 1982. "Switch reference in Bantu languages." *Journal of West African Languages* 12(2):42–57.
- Wieseemann, Ursula (ed.). 1986a. *Pronominal Systems*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.
- See especially the two contributions by Wieseemann, U. "The Pronoun Systems of some Jê and Macro-Jê Languages", 359-380
- and "Grammaticalized coreference" , 437–463
- Wieseemann, Ursula. 1986b. "Les degrés de spécificité verbale en allemand." Presented at the Table Ronde de Linguistique, Dakar.
- Wieseemann, Ursula. 1986c. "Aspect and mood as a nine-cell matrix." In Elson, B. F. (editor) *Language in global perspective*, 471–506. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.