while expression of two overt third-persons in a clause requires the use of the middle (2a) or the passive voice (2b), formed by the addition of the middle suffix -b to one of the causatives (Beck 1996). Both of these result in intransitive clauses where one of the two actants is realized as an oblique contained within a prepositional phrase:

(2)

a. ?u-ŋ'əç-əb  ti  čačas  ?ə ti  sq”əbay?
PNT–look:for–MD  D  boy  P  D  dog
‘the boy looked for the dog’

b. ?u-ŋ'əç-t-əb  ?ə ti  čačas  ti  sq”əbay?
PNT–look:for–ICS–MD  P  D  boy  D  dog
‘the dog was looked for by the boy’

Facts such as these have led some writers (e.g. Jelinek & Demers 1983) to posit that Lushootseed has a split ergative system in which third-person NPs such as ti sq”əbay? ‘the dog’ in (1c) and ti čačas ‘the boy’ in (2a) are absolutive subjects and that PPs such as ?ə ti čačas ‘of the boy’ in (2b) would be ergatively-marked agents. While the primary researcher on Lushootseed, Thom Hess, does not accept the ergative analysis, he does feel a split system in the sense that sentences with third-person agents such as (1c) allow for only a single non-oblique actant, the “direct complement” (ti sq”əbay? in (1) and (2b)). The absence of an overt agent-pronominal in the sentence in (1c) indicates that it is, in fact, intransitive; thus, verbs such as g”əçəd are termed “patient-oriented” in that their direct complement—the only allowable NP—refers only to a semantic patient. According to Hess (p.c.), this analysis renders the notion of “syntactic subject” largely extraneous to the treatment of Lushootseed grammar, a claim which seems to be upheld by his accurate and insightful descriptive work on the language.

Outside the immediate domain of Lushootseed, however, such a stand is highly problematic in that the syntactic role of “subject” (or its reflex in a particular theory) is