Summary

This thesis presents a comparative and diachronic description of five Mayan languages spoken in Mexico and Guatemala: Cholti’, Ch’orti’, Acalán Chontal, modern Chontal, and Chol. These languages, some of which are extinct (Cholti’ and Acalán Chontal) or categorized as seriously (modern Chontal) or critically endangered (Ch’orti’) in the UNESCO classification, belong to the Cholan group of languages. The work, which is mainly based on first-hand data, has the dual purpose of providing a better description of each of these languages through a comparative approach and to reconstruct the proto-morphology of these agglutinative languages. The access to earlier stages of the languages is particularly important because of the presence within the group of another language of special importance in the Mayan family, namely the language of the pre-Columbian hieroglyphic inscriptions. The introduction to the dissertation provides an opportunity to summarize our knowledge of the history of the Cholan peoples in the Maya area since the beginning of the first millennium AD.

The first linguistic part focuses on the synchronic (Chapter 1) and diachronic (Chapter 2) phonological systems of the Cholan languages, which are characterized by divergent evolutions due to the relatively recent loss of the vowel length contrast. Chapter 3 presents the various morphophonological systems of the languages in the group, a prerequisite to the morphological analyses that are developed throughout the study. Chapter 4 describes the key characteristics of the morpho-syntax of the Cholan languages, including a discussion of their agglutinative typology, their ergative morphosyntactic alignment or split ergativity, their head-markedness, as well as their omnipredicative nature. This chapter also includes a presentation of the different parts of speech and root classes that may be distinguished for these languages. The last two chapters contain maximally comprehensive analyses of the nominal (Chapter 5) and verbal (Chapter 6) systems with particular focus on the inflectional and derivational morphology, as well as on the various derived forms related to these two main categories. The Appendix provides a synthesis of all the markers and morphological patterns discussed in the main text, which amount to a little less than 200 items.

http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/