

Differences in Linguists' Perceptions of the History of Korean Language: Focusing on the Causes

MOON Hyun-soo

Inha University, Republic of Korea

punglim@gmail.com

Abstract

Differing perceptions of Korean language history exist among South Korean, North Korean, and Korean-Chinese linguists. Notably, they disagree on the timing of Old Korean and Medieval Korean. North Korean scholars place Old Korean into the period from the early 30th century to the 3rd century BC, and Medieval Korean into the period from the 3rd century BC to the 19th century AD. South Korean linguists, however, fit Old Korean into the period from the 4th century to the 10th century AD and Medieval Korean into the period from the 10th century to the 16th century AD. These variations stem from differing research perspectives: South Koreans rely on literary and linguistic sources, while North Koreans emphasize Marxist historical development. Korean-Chinese linguists initially aligned with North Korean views but have shifted due to evolving diplomatic relations between China and South Korea.

Keywords: Korean language history, Korean linguistics, South Korean linguists, North Korean linguists, Korean-Chinese linguists

Povzetek

Med južnokorejskimi, severnokorejskimi in korejsko-kitajskimi jezikoslovci obstajajo razlike v dojemljanju zgodovine korejskega jezika. Predvsem se ne strinjajo o časovni razporeditvi stare in srednjeveške korejščine. Severnokorejski jezikoslovci umeščajo staro korejščino v obdobje od zgodnjega 30. stoletja pr. n. št. do 3. stoletja pr. n. št., srednjeveško korejščino pa v obdobje od 3. stoletja pr. n. št. do 19. stoletja n. št. Južnokorejski jezikoslovci pa opredeljujejo obdobje stare korejščine od 4. do 10. stoletja n. št. ter obdobje srednjeveške korejščine od 10. do 16. stoletja n. št. Te razlike izhajajo iz različnih raziskovalnih perspektiv: Južnokorejci se opirajo na literarne in jezikovne vire, medtem ko Severnokorejci poudarjajo marksistični zgodovinski razvoj. Korejsko-kitajski jezikoslovci so sprva delili severnokorejske poglede, vendar so zaradi razvijajočih se diplomatskih odnosov med Kitajsko in Južno Korejo kasneje sprejeli južnokorejsko perspektivo.

Ključne besede: zgodovina korejskega jezika, korejsko jezikoslovje, južnokorejski jezikoslovci, severnokorejski jezikoslovci, korejsko-kitajski jezikoslovci



1 Introduction

Linguists studying the history of the Korean language in South Korea, North Korea, and China often hold different perspectives on the same historical narrative. This is because academic exchanges between North and South Korea have been impossible since the Korean War in 1950, and scholars in both countries have studied Korean independently. While linguists of Korean history in China could conduct academic exchanges with linguists in North Korea, a communist country, academic exchanges with South Korea were essentially impossible until the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992.

This historical background has led to different views of the same linguistic facts among South Korean, North Korean, and Chinese linguists. Although these differences in perception are recognized, little attention has been given to understanding their underlying causes. In the following discussion, we will examine these differences, focusing on the history of the Korean language and explore the causes of these differences. We highlight that these differences may not solely stem from variations in the analysis of linguistic facts but could also be influenced by the researchers' nationalities.

2 South Korean linguistic perspective: *Gugeosagaeseol* 국어사개설 (Introduction to Korean Language History)

Although there are different opinions on the periodization of Korean language history, linguists in South Korea generally follow the periodization presented in *Gugeosagaeseol* 국어사개설 (1972) by Professor Lee Ki-moon from the Seoul National University.¹ In this study, the periods of Korean history are categorized as shown in Table 1.

¹ For the discussion of different views of South Korean linguists on the periodization of the Korean language history, See Chung (2019), Hong (2019), Song and Park (2019).

Table 1: The periodization of Korean language history in *Gugeosagaeseol*

Chronology	Era	Key events	Periodization	Language resources
2333 BC 194 BC 108 BC	Gojoseon era	Dangun Joseon Wiman Joseon Fall of Gojoseon		
57 BC 37 BC 18 BC	Proto-Three Kingdoms era	Founding of Silla Founding of Goguryeo Founding of Baekje		
Early 4c. 660 668	Three Kingdoms era	Gwanggaeto Inscription Fall of Baekje Fall of Goguryeo	Old Korean	Materials written in Chinese borrowed character
676 698	North and South Kingdoms era	Unification of the Three Kingdoms by Silla Founding of Balhae		
918 936	Goryeo era	Founding of Goryeo Unification by Goryeo	Early medieval Korean	Materials written in Hangeul (Korean alphabet)
1392 1443 1446 1592-8 1876 1894	Joseon era	Founding of Joseon Creation of Hangeul Promulgation of Hangeul Imjin War Japan-Korea Treaty Gab-O Reform	Late medieval Korean	
			Modern Korean	
1897	Korean Empire era	Declaration of Korean Empire	Contemporary Korean	Materials written in Hangeul (Korean alphabet)
1910 1933	Japanese colonialism era	Korea-Japan merger Unification of Hangeul Orthography		
1945 1950 1953	The Republic of Korea era	liberation of Korea Korean War Truce		

In *Gugeosagaeseol*, the Old Korean period is reported to extend from the 4th to the 10th century AD. The Medieval Korean period is divided into early and late periods. The early medieval period is from the 10th century to the 14th century AD, and the late medieval period is from the 15th century to the 16th century AD. Modern Korean is also divided into early and late periods: early modern Korean extends from the 17th century to the mid-18th century, and late modern Korean spans the late 18th century to the 19th century. Contemporary Korean is categorized from the 20th century to the present.

The most distinctive feature is that it dates the beginning of Old Korean to the 4th century AD, during the middle of the Three Kingdoms period. This is because the earliest written material is found from this time. The earliest written source of Korean is the *Gwanggaeto Daewang* inscription from Goguryeo, one of the Three Kingdoms. It is written primarily in classical Chinese using Chinese characters but is considered to reflect Korean word order in some places. The *Imsinseogiseok* inscription of Silla, one of the Three Kingdoms, which is regarded as a 6th-century source. Although it is also written in Chinese characters, it consistently follows Korean word order and is therefore treated as a representative Korean source (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: *Imsinseogiseok* inscription (552)

The details of Figure 1 are shown in example (1), where the A row represents the characters as they appear in the original text, the B row shows the Contemporary Korean writing along with its transliteration, corresponding to A. The C row provides the English translation of B, and finally, the D row presents the English translation of the entire Korean sentence. Unlike the A row in (2) below, the A row in (1) does not represent

case markers or endings. This does not imply that there were no morphemes for case markers or endings at the time. Rather, the development of the Korean writing system, based on borrowings from Chinese characters, was not yet complete, and therefore, characters for case markers and endings did not exist.

- (1) A 若 此 事 失 天 大 罪
 B manyak i il eogi(myeon) haneul(eui) keun beol(eul)
 만약 이 일 어기(면) 하늘(의) 큰 벌(을)
 C if this thing violate heaven big punishment
- A 得 誓²
 B bad(gileul) maengse(handa)
 받기(를) 맹세(한다)
 C receive swear
- D 'If we violate any of these, we swear that we will be punished by the heavens.'

After the unification of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla by Silla in 676, the language of *Silla*, located in the southeast, became the center of the Korean language. As a result, the period before the establishment of Goryeo, with its capital in the central region, in 918, is considered the period of Old Korean, with the *Silla* language at its core. During this time, Korean grammatical morphemes were transcribed using adapted Chinese characters, and Korean sentences were recorded according to Korean word order (See Figure 2).

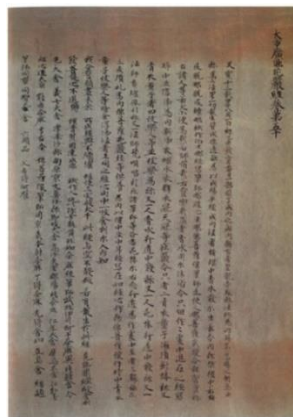


Figure 2: A document on how to transcribe the *Hwahum* Sutra (775)

² Chinese word order: 若失此事, 誓得大罪於天.

The details of Figure 2 are shown in example (2). The labeling of rows A, B, C, and D is the same as in example (1).

- (2) A 經 之 成 內 法 者 楮根 中
 B gyeong eui mandeu neun beob eun dagnamuppuli e
 경 의 만드 는 법 은 닥나무뿌리 에
 C sutra genitive make suffix methods topic paper mulberry locative
- (2) A 香水 散 尔 生長 令 內 弥³
 B hyangsu ppulyeo seo saengjang siki neun(geos) (i)myeo
 향수 뿌려 서 생장 시키 는(것) (이)며
 C perfume spray conj. grow causative suffix conj.
- D 'The sutra is made by (first) spraying perfume on the roots of a paper mulberry and growing it, ...'

Compared to the A row in (1), the A row in (2) actively uses characters that represent case markers and endings. This is because the development of the Korean writing system, which is based on borrowing from Chinese characters, has progressed considerably.

The medieval Korean period begins with the founding of Goryeo, reflecting the shift in the linguistic center from the southeast to the central region, as Goryeo's capital, Gaeseong, was located in the central Korea. One of the best examples of this linguistic shift is the *Gyerim Yusa* (1103), a collection of Korean vocabulary recorded during the Song Dynasty in China. In this work, a man named Sun Mu (孫穆) documented Goryeo vocabulary firsthand, transcribing it into Chinese characters based on the Chinese pronunciation of the time (See example (3)).

- (3) A 天 曰 漢榛⁴
 B Cheon wal hʌnʌl
 천 왈 후늘
 C sky say "hʌnʌl"
 D 'Sky is pronounced "hʌnʌl" in Korean.'

The characteristics of the language in this lexicon are more similar to the language of the later *Joseon* period than of the earlier Silla period. Therefore, the Korean of the Goryeo and early Joseon periods is grouped together as the Medieval Korean period.

³ Chinese word order: 成經之法者, 散香水於楮根中, 令生長之, ...

⁴ 漢榛 [hʌnʌl] (12c.) > 후늘 [hʌnʌl] (15c.) > 하늘 [haneul] (21c.)

The period of Modern Korean is considered to have begun in the 17th century, during the middle of the Joseon Dynasty. This transition is believed to have been influenced by the wars between *Joseon* and Japan, as well as *Joseon* and the Qing Dynasty of China. These conflicts caused people to flee their homelands, leading to significant language changes. For example, this resulted in the loss of tones, except in the southeastern dialects, and the loss of major simple vowels such as $\cdot \lambda$ and initial consonant clusters such as ㅍsk and ㅍst .

For example, the following sentence from the first edition of the *Dusieonhae* (杜詩諺解), published in the 15th century, was revised in the 17th-century intermediate edition.

(4) a. [15th century *Dusieonhae* 22:30]

男兒이 功名 일·우미 ·또 늘·근 ·ㅍㅅ·도 잇·ㅅ나라

namaei gongmyeong ilumi sto neulgeun pskeuido isnanila

'Boys may be given a name at a later stage in life.'

b. [17th century *Dusieonhae* 22:30]

男兒의 功名 일우미 또 늘근 ㅍㅅ도 잇·ㅅ나라

namaeui gongmyeong ilumi sto neulgeun pkeuido isnanila

'Boys may be given a name at a later stage in life.'

In this revision, $\text{ㅍ}\lambda$ has been changed to ㅍeui as $\cdot \lambda$ has lost the status of a phoneme, and ㅍsk has become ㅍkeui as the initial consonant cluster has been lost. Also, in the 15th century, tonal markers (a single dot presented a high tone, two dots a rising tone, and no dots a low tone) were indicated with dots placed on the left side of a syllable to indicate tonality, but by the 17th century, these dots had disappeared together with the loss of tonality.

The Contemporary Korean language period is considered to have begun in 1894, when the Joseon Dynasty opened the country to foreign influences, including Japan. This exposure led to the adoption of various loanwords and efforts to harmonize the spoken and written Korean, resulting in major stylistic changes. In addition, a comprehensive revision of orthography was undertaken to eliminate obsolete consonants and vowels and to standardize spelling practices.

For example, the Korean-Chinese hybrid sentences such as (5a) from the Declaration of Independence of *Kimi* (1919) was changed to a colloquial form as follows in (5b).

- (5) a. 吾等은 茲에 我朝鮮의 獨立國임과 朝鮮人의 自主民임을 宣言하노라
odeungeun jae ajoseonui dongnipgugimgwa joseoninui jajuminimeul
seoneonhanora
‘We hereby declare that Korea is an independent country and that
Koreans are sovereign people.’
- b. 우리들은 이에 우리 조선이 독립국임과 조선인이 자주민임을 선언하노라
urideureun ie uri joseoni dongnipgugimgwa joseonini jajuminimeul
seoneonhanora
‘We hereby declare that Korea is an independent country and that
Koreans are sovereign people.’

Additionally, the characters ㅅ *sk*, ㅌ *st*, ㅍ *sp*, and ㅈ *sj*, which were used to represent fortis, were replaced by ㄱ *kk*, ㄷ *tt*, ㅂ *pp*, and ㅊ *jj*, respectively. Also ㆍ *l*, which continued to be written even after losing its status as a phoneme, was replaced by ㅏ *a*.

3 North Korean linguistic perspective: *Joseonmallyeoksa* 조선말력사 (A History of Korean Language)

Joseoneohakjeonseo 조선어학전서 (e.g. Ryu, 2005a; Ryu, 2005b; Ryu, 2005c; Ryu, 2005d) is a compilation and systematization of North Korean research on the Korean language conducted over the past 60 years since the founding of the government. It was initiated by the Institute of Linguistics of the North Korean Academy of Social Sciences and began publication in 2005, culminating in a total of 63 volumes. As a whole, the series appears to serve as both a theoretical and normative body of work, unified in system and methodology, and declares North Korea's official stance on Korean language research for both domestic and international audiences. As such, it provides a complete picture of the history of Korean language research in North Korea.⁵

Among these volumes, those specifically related to the history of the Korean language are volumes 4 through 13. In particular, volumes 4 through 10 form the *Joseonmallyeoksa* series, which traces the history of the Korean language from the Gojoseon Dynasty (30th century – 3rd century BC) to the present day. This series was authored by prominent linguists Ryu Ryeol, Kim

⁵ For a scholarly assessment of *Joseoneohakjeonseo* by a South Korean linguist, see Kwon (2012). For an evaluation of the history of linguistics in North Korea up to 1990 by North Korean linguists, see Kim and Kwon (1996). For an analysis of the history of linguistics in North Korea since 1990 by South Korean linguists, see Lee et al. (2018).

Inho, and Baek Woon-hyuk. Volume 4 covers the history of the Korean language from the Gojoseon period to the era of the North and South Kingdoms period (3rd century BC – 10th century AD), and Volume 5 covers the history of the Korean language from the Goryeo period (10th century – 14th century AD) to the 16th century. Both are reprints of Ryu Ryeol's (1918-2004) earlier works of the same titles, originally published in 1990 and 1992, respectively, with some modifications. Volumes 6 through 10 present new contributions by Ryu Ryeol, Kim Inho, and Baek Woon-hyuk, addressing the history of the Korean language in later periods.

The *Joseonmallyeoksa* series categorizes the periods of Korean language history as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: The periodization of Korean language history in *Joseonmallyeoksa*

Old Korean	Medieval Korean				Modern Korean	Contemporary K.	
	Early	Middle		Late		Early	Late
		Goryeo	Joseon Early				
30c. BC	3c. BC	10c.	15c.	17c.	1866	1926	1946
–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3c. BC	10c. AD	14c.	16c.	1866	1925	1945	now

The Old Korean language period is referred to as the Gojoseon period, spanning from the early 30th century BC to the 3rd century BC. The Medieval Korean period is divided into the Early, Middle, and Late periods. The Early Medieval period is combines the Three Kingdoms period and the North and South Korean periods without making a clear distinction. The Middle Medieval period is divided into the Goryeo and the Joseon period.⁶ The Late Medieval period spans from the Imjin War (1592) to the late 19th century (1866) in the Joseon Dynasty, and the Modern Korean period begins in the late 19th century (1866) and extends to 1926, when Kim Il Sung is said to have formed an anti-Japanese fighting organization. The Contemporary Korean language period is divided into two phases: the first, from 1926 to 1945 (prior to Korea's liberation), and the second, following the liberation of Korea.

⁶ Similar to the periodization used in South Korea, the Goryeo period reflects the shift in the location of the central language from the southeast to the central region with the founding of Goryeo, while the Joseon period is marked by the creation of *Hangeul*.

The Old Korean language period includes the Gojoseon period and the early Three Kingdoms period, prior to the establishment of the feudal state. During this time, the Ye (濊), Mac (貊), and Han (韓) peoples lived in Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula and are believed to have spoken a common language. The transition from The Old and Medieval Korean is considered to be the establishment of the Three Kingdoms period in the 3rd century BC. This reflects the position of North Korean historiography, which, according to the Marxist theory of five stages of historical development, considers the Medieval period to begin with the establishment of the feudal state, contrasting it with antiquity. Consequently, North Korean research on the history of the Korean language recognizes it as a continuous process of historical development.

The Middle Medieval period spans a much longer period, from the 3rd century BC to the 10th century AD. Historically, this period includes the Three Kingdoms period of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla, as well as the North and the South Kingdoms periods of Unified Silla and Balhae. However, *Joseonmallyeoksa* does not treat these as meaningful divisions of time and instead combines them all into the Early Medieval Period. This periodization reflects the belief that Korea was a single people from the beginning, with the languages of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla regarded as a dialect of a single language. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the center of the language was the Goguryeo language, and even after the Silla's unification of the Three Kingdoms, the Goguryeo language continued through Balhae, which was founded shortly afterward.

The Middle Medieval period is differentiated from the Early Medieval period by the establishment of the unified Goryeo kingdom. Linguistically, the distinction is marked by changes resulting from the relocation of the capital and the emergence of new phonemes such as consonants ㅃ /β/ and ㅈ /z/ and semi-vowels ㅣ /i/ and ㅓ /u/. On the other hand, the founding of the Joseon Dynasty is seen merely as a dynastic change within the feudal system. Thus linguistically, the 15th and 16th centuries are grouped with the Goryeo period under the broader Medieval Korean period. It is important to note that, unlike South Korea, North Korea does not consider the shift of the central language due to the capital's relocation as a major dividing point for distinguishing Old Korean from Medieval Korean. Instead, it maintains that the languages of Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla were fundamentally one language with no significant differences.

The late medieval period covers the period from the 17th century to the late 19th century (1866), which South Korean linguists categorize as part of

the modern language period. This partly reflects the North Korean historical community's view of the Joseon Dynasty as a medieval feudal state.

The modern Korean language period is considered to have begun after 1866, marked by the burning of the U.S. merchant ship General Sherman by civilians in Pyongyang. North Korea views this as a symbolic event that defeated the American invasion ship, a symbol of Euro-American capitalist power, and preserved the nation's sovereignty, marking the beginning of the modern era, when the country broke away from the feudal state of Joseon. In terms of language, it is used as a reference point for the division of the period, noting that the emergence of a vocabulary that reflects the characteristics of modern ideas, institutions, etc.

The beginning of the Contemporary Korean language is also defined by the year 1926, when Kim Il Sung is said to have formed an anti-Japanese fighting organization. This period is divided into two phases: the early period and the late period, the later beginning after liberation.

4 Korean-Chinese linguistic perspective: *Joseoneobaldalsa* 조선어발달사 (A History of the Development of the Korean Language)

Joseoneobaldalsa (1982) is classic work on the history of the Korean language written by Professor Ahn Byung-ho of Peking University in China. Ahn, a Korean-Chinese scholar, was born in 1929 in *Heilongjiang* Province, China. He graduated from the Department of Korean language and literature at Yanbian University and pursued further studies at *Kim Il Sung* University in North Korea. The book was published in 1982 in Shenyang, China.

Before 1992, when South Korea and China officially established diplomatic relations, academic exchanges between the two countries were essentially impossible. Thus, it is not surprising that Ahn's academic background aligns more closely with North Korea than South Korea. In his work, Ahn uses North Korean academic terminology to describe linguistic phenomena, and given his choice of academic terminology and the timing of his studies in North Korea, it is likely that he was heavily influenced by Professor Hong Ki-moon, an early and prominent North Korean scholar specializing in the history of the Korean language.

This is best illustrated by the concept and terminology Ahn uses for *Yidu* (吏讀). Hong (1957) is a book-length publication based on Hong's doctoral thesis, submitted in 1957, which presents his original research on *Yidu*. Hong's findings differ from those of researchers in Japan and South Korea.

In Ahn (1982), the terms and concepts from Hong (1957) are employed to describe the scripts used prior to the creation of Hangeul in his chapter 3.

Table 3: The periodization of Korean language history in *Joseoneobaldalsa*

Old Korean			Medieval Korean		Modern Korean	Contemp. Korean
Proto	Early	Late	Early	Late		
	2c.	7c.	10c.	15c.	17c.	20c.
-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2c.	7c.	10c.	14c.	16c.	19c.	now

Table 3 summarizes the periodization of the history of the Korean language in *Joseoneobaldalsa*. It is interesting to note that these periods are largely the same as those of Professor Lee Ki-moon in South Korea, rather than the periods of Professor Ryu Ryeol in North Korea. This difference stems from Ahn's focus on linguistic history rather than political or historical perspectives.

Although North Korea and China are both socialist countries, their approaches differ significantly. North Korea is a mono-ethnic state, while China is a multi-ethnic state centered around the Han (漢) Chinese. To emphasize its national unity, North Korea emphasizes that a single ethnic group has spoken a single language from the beginning. According to this view, the languages of the Ye (濊), Mac (貊), and Han (韓) peoples were identical before the Three Kingdoms period, and the languages of the Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla peoples were the same during the Three Kingdoms period. North Korean scholars further claim that the central language was the language of Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea and the ancient Goguryeo kingdom. Additionally, they assert that Korean has no cognate language family in comparative linguistics.

However, Ahn (1982) does not fully adopt this North Korean political and historical perspective. He expresses his reservations about the idea that the languages of various tribes or nations before and after the Three Kingdoms period were identical. In addition, his work reflects the influence of global linguistic research trends at the time, including studies on the genealogical relationships between Korean and other languages.

For example, in chapter 10 of Ahn (1982), he discusses the Korean language family and compares Korean with Mongolian as well as with Japanese. This perspective clearly differs from that of North Korean linguists, who assert that Korean has no related language family.

North Korea's politically driven periodization ties the beginning of Contemporary Korean to 1926, the year Kim Il-sung is said to have begun his anti-Japanese resistance. Ahn, however, does not adhere to this political framework. Instead, he organizes historical periods according to linguistic changes, and as a result, his categorization of the periods closely resembles that of Lee Ki-moon in South Korea.

With the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China in 1992, academic exchanges between the two countries became possible, giving Korean-Chinese linguists greater access to research findings obtained in South Korea. Additionally, many young scholars who studied in South Korea returned to China and assumed university positions, bringing South Korean academic methodologies and terminology with them. As a result, in the 21st century, Korean-Chinese linguists have become more aligned with their South Korean counterparts than they were in earlier periods.

5 Conclusion

There are some notable differences in perception of the history of the Korean language among South Korean, North Korean, and Korean-Chinese linguists. One of the most significant differences is in how the periods Old Korean and Middle Korean are defined. North Korean linguists consider the Old Korean period to span from the early 30th century BC to the 3rd century BC, and the Medieval Korean period to cover the time from the 3rd century BC to the 19th century AD. This reflects the perspective of North Korean historians, who, based on the Marxist theory of historical development, define the beginning of the Medieval period as the establishment of the feudal state.

South Korean linguists, on the other hand, consider the Old Korean period as spanning from the 4th century AD to the 10th century AD, and the Medieval Korean period as lasting from the 10th to the 16th century AD. This is because they study the history of the Korean language from a positivist perspective based on strictly literary and linguistic sources.

North Korea's classification of Korean language history reflects its political ideology, making it challenging to reach a consensus unless South Korean linguists align with their perspective. However, agreeing with a viewpoint rooted in North Korea's political position could result in legal repercussions for South Korean scholars. Additionally, South Korean linguists are unlikely to classify periods without sufficient literary and linguistic evidence as part of the Old Korean period.

At first, Korean-Chinese linguists were heavily influenced by North Korean scholars and their perception of Korean language history was similar. However, after China and South Korea established diplomatic relations in the 1990s, Korean-Chinese linguists gradually adopted the research findings of South Korean scholars. Unlike South and North Korea, where academic exchanges are impossible, China permits scholarly collaborations with both countries.

It is ironic that the interpretation of the same linguistic facts is shaped not by the language itself, but on the nationality and political stance of the linguists' respective countries.

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