Introduction

It is sometimes said that reconstructed proto-languages or stages of languages are merely theoretical constructs that help us keep track of linguistic changes of various kinds as they unfold over time. They never correspond exactly to languages we would identify if we could travel back in time to observe speech communities firsthand. Certainly, no reconstruction embodies the full richness of a living language. Yet so great is the confidence we now have in the historical reality of well-developed reconstructions, such as proto-Indo-European, that we are entitled, I believe, to evaluate more tentative hypotheses by applying the Law of the Excluded Middle: either two languages suspected of arising from a common source did so recently enough that a rigorous application of the comparative method can tell us something about that common source, or they did not. In the case of Japanese and Korean, I will argue that the preponderance of the evidence favors a common source even though the languages separated so far in the past that many signs of their common origin have become obscured.

The argument has both affirmative and negative components. On the one hand, we can identify words in Old Japanese that must have been borrowed from Korean long after the two languages, if related, had become mutually unintelligible. These traces of contact complement the non-linguistic evidence of interactions that played a crucial role in the rise of tumulus (Kofun) culture in Japan, and ultimately the sinified Yamato state of the 8th century CE. But the duration of the contact was too brief and the number of people mediating it too few to account for all the similarities we find in the two languages if they were originally unrelated. Remove the borrowings from the etymologies offered in support of proto-Korean-Japanese and one is still left with more lexical material pointing toward common origin than ought to be there by chance, not to mention parallelisms in grammar not seen in nearby languages of similar type. Yet archaeological and physical evidence does not support the hypothesis of an earlier, lengthier period of contact that might have given rise to all these resemblances. To the limited extent we have information about the linguistic situation on the Korean peninsula prior to the dominance of the Korean language, a predecessor of Japanese must once have been quite
widely spoken there. Proto-Japanese separated from it long before the start of intensive contact with Korean, which eventually became the sole language of the peninsula.

The argument is informed by recent research in a variety of disciplines. These studies have shown that the range of settlement of the neolithic (Jōmon) inhabitants of Japan did not extend to the continent; that elements of the Megalithic (Mumun) culture of the Korean peninsula that superseded its neolithic (Chūlmu) culture were introduced starting in the 2nd millennium BCE; that the diffusion of elements of the resulting Megalithic culture to Japan from ca. 1000 BCE was greatly accelerated ca. 300 BCE by migrations from southeastern Korea; and that certain ancient names for places scattered throughout the peninsula contain morphemes of a Japanese-like language that must once have been widely spoken there. Such findings strongly support the hypothesis that the Japanese language was brought to Japan from southeastern Korea by migrants during the 1st millennium BCE.

What, then, was the relationship between pre-Japanese and pre-Korean prior to the migrations?

If they were unrelated languages, the first opportunity for an extended period of contact that might account for their many grammatical similarities would have been the 4th century CE, when tumulus (Kofun) culture, with clear peninsular antecedents, began to emerge in Japan. But this development was gradual, not abrupt, and it did not involve a massive migration from the peninsula. We can identify loanwords in Old Japanese that must have been borrowed from a fully differentiated Korean during or after this time, but they are clearly distinguishable from other lexical matches because of their restricted distributions, specialized meanings, and modest number.

If, on the other hand, pre-Japanese and contemporary Korean had anciently separated from a common source, the grammatical similarities are much easier to understand; the problem shifts to the paucity of lexical matches. Great time depth partly explains this, but the different sources of input to peninsular Megalithic culture suggests a second factor. Wet-field rice cultivation spread from the south whereas bronze and dolmens were introduced from the north; during their period of separation, pre-Japanese and pre-Korean replaced many words inherited from their com-
mon source language with words borrowed from contact languages at opposite ends of the range.

The hypothesis, that the extension of the proto-Korean-Japanese range from north to south allowed for the development of two distinct languages and separate encounters with languages at the two extremes of the range, implies that the term Han 韓 did not originally designate specifically Korean groups of the southern peninsula. I argue, indeed, that the kingdom of Silla took form in the 4th century CE and that Old Korean was not exclusively the language of Silla. These claims run counter to traditional ideas about Korean prehistory, but are, I think, amply justified by the data I have assembled. More problematic is identifying the external contact languages involved in the Chulmun-Mumun transition: I tentatively conjecture that wet-field rice was introduced to the southern peninsula by a seafaring people, probably to be identified with the (Dōng) Yi of the Chinese histories and that the northern languages may have belonged to the Tungusic family, from which proto-Korean-Japanese itself perhaps separated many centuries earlier. But the theory offered here does not depend on these identifications: its essential claim is that the hypothesis of a genetic relationship between Japanese and Korean is no worse than the alternative and that the prehistory of the region is best studied with that hypothesis in mind.