The re-creation of ancestor languages is a daunting task. It is the nature of language to change constantly, so much so that it is difficult to keep track of those changes even in an age of relatively high literacy. It is even more difficult to trace historic changes in a given language or language family back to its extinct parent, or “proto-“ form, especially when no written records are known to exist. Fortunately, the study of ancient languages like Sanskrit and Latin, and their subsequent comparison to more modern languages, has enabled linguists to construct a systematic method of linguistic comparison. By comparing large groups of vocabulary words, noting consistent phonological changes, and establishing similar syntactical patterns, linguists are able to identify “sibling” languages, and to extrapolate, with relative certainty, the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the proto-language from which these siblings emerged.

Language relatedness is determined in part by comparing a large selection of vocabulary words from the languages in question. In order to avoid vocabulary words that may have been borrowed from otherwise unrelated languages, linguists must take care to select those words that can be considered “basic.” As such, they tend to select words for such universalities as parts of the body, necessities like food and water or phenomena indigenous to the geographic region in which the languages are spoken, like snow, seas, or mountains. To help determine relatedness, linguists can compare these common words, looking for systematic and recurrent similarities between the languages. For example, when comparing English with Swedish, we see that foot=fot, night=natt, fish=fisk, snow=snö, and heart=hjärta. If the similarities between the vocabulary words of these two languages continue, relatedness is likely.

Not all similarities between sibling languages are as clear as the similarities between English and Swedish, however. Over the centuries, geographically isolated offspring of a parent language will undergo different sound changes, often rendering utterly divergent derivatives of a single word. Fortunately, these sound changes are by and large regular, and the “new” sounds are inevitably produced in the mouth in close proximity to the “old” ones. There is, for instance, a consistent relationship between the labiodental fricative \( ph \) in Hellenic languages, and the labial stop \( b \) in Germanic languages. Thus the Greek word \( phero \) (“I carry”) became the English word bear; likewise, \( phrater \) (“kinsman”) became brother. Such consistency provides great insight into the possible phonology of the proto-language; knowing that \( ph \) and \( b \) are both produced with the lips, linguists can assume it is unlikely that the same words in the proto-language began with, for example, the glottal sound \( h \).

Of course, any linguist relying strictly on similar vocabulary could easily be misled into aligning non-related languages. This is particularly true when studying the languages of cultures that have had a lot of contact over the years, and have likely borrowed vocabulary extensively from one another. A particularly apt example is the large corpus of French vocabulary—thanks to the Norman occupation of England—present in Modern English (e.g., table, pork, village, souvenir). A comparison of English and French based on vocabulary alone could therefore lead to the erroneous conclusion that the two languages are closely related, thus leading to an inaccurate picture of the proto-language. To avoid this kind of mistake, linguists examine the grammar and syntax of languages, searching for consistent patterns; if few exist, close relation is unlikely. When comparing English and French using this criterion, the differences are clear; for
example, the English comparatives good/better/best are utterly different from the French bon/meilleur/le meilleur, but nearly identical to the German gut/besser/best-. If further comparison shows systematic, consistent grammatical and syntactic differences between English and French, close relatedness is unlikely.

Using systematic comparisons like this can enable linguists to reconstruct a substantial amount of the phonology, morphology, and syntax of a proto-language. Unfortunately, difficulties arise when linguists attempt to construct actual sentences, due in part to widespread and ongoing disagreement concerning what may appear to be minor details. For example, in reconstructing a sentence like “The brother left,” linguists must struggle with a number of questions as to the exact inflection and phonology of the words in the sentence. For example, when considering the verb “left,” linguists may disagree about a number of things: How did the proto-speakers express past tense? Were there any phonological augmentations in use at the time? If so, were they universal or dialectical? (Such is the case with the reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European language, for which no fewer than three different sound systems have been proposed since the nineteenth century). As minor as these kinds of details may seem, their sheer volume can effectively bring the reconstruction of an extinct language to a grinding halt.

In spite of the disagreement that is inevitable in their line of work, linguists invariably agree on the efficiency and empirical reliability of the comparative method. This method has allowed linguists to move away from the largely instinctive and deductive methods that were employed in their field prior to the nineteenth century, and to move comparative linguistics into the realm of serious academic pursuit. And while new archeological discoveries continue to shed light and stir new controversies, linguists will still rely on the comparative method to help them paint a clearer and clearer picture of long-extinct languages.