Language change can often be observed by comparing series of linguistic records from different periods in time. In a longitudinal study of that kind, a given linguistic change may appear in the younger records, while being absent in the earlier ones. A cross-sectional study of a series of contemporary linguistic records may, however, reveal a much more complex picture.

This paper discusses the diphthongization é > ie in 14th-century Icelandic, as evidenced by an orthographic change in manuscripts written by two scribes in the middle of the 14th century. The scribes in question are anonymous, but they belonged to two different scriptoria and thus it is believed that they lived and worked in two different locations in Iceland. Seventeen manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts written by the scribes have been preserved. These manuscripts contain a range of different texts, copied from a variety of different sources, probably over a long scribal career.

Even if the orthography of the two scribes differs in several aspects, they share one characteristic: In the course of their scribal careers, the manifestation of the diphthongization of é goes from little or no evidence at all to becoming quite prominent. This change in orthography can be interpreted in at least two ways:

1. This is simply a gradual change in orthographic practice without any change in pronunciation.
2. This orthographic change reflects a gradual change in pronunciation, effectively a sound change in real time.

It will be argued that medieval scribes were probably not capable of consistently maintaining orthographic properties that were at odds with their pronunciation and that in general medieval orthography better reflects pronunciation than modern orthography. It is therefore possible that this gradual orthographic change over a long scribal career — probably two or three decades — may in fact reflect a sound change in real time.