Comparative linguistics is built on the linguistic facts from the individual languages to be compared. To erect a sturdy building a stable fundament is needed, in the building trade as well as in linguistics. In comparative linguistics the stones, the facts, come often from so many different languages that it cannot be expected from a scholar to have the expertise to test, and if necessary reject, the data from each and every relevant language and dialect. Of necessity he has to rely on the work of other scholars and in particular on grammars, dictionaries and similar works.

As the quality of such handbooks can differ considerably, the comparatist should know for each language at least which handbooks and authors are considered to be reliable in their field, and have a basic understanding of the language. If he has not, he could well build a nice theory on a ghost word, a printing error or a completely misunderstood form. The best way to avoid building on rubble instead of on rock is probably cooperation with specialists in the various languages.

The remarks above are, I think, self evident, but my recent reading of Dirk Boutkan's *The Germanic Auslautgesetze* brought the realization that the author — and, as it is a doctoral thesis, one must suppose his thesis supervisor too — has had more eye for the structure to be erected than for the fundament he was building on.

Already a cursory glance at the book turned up some forms, which I did not recognize and could not find in the grammars. I decided to have a better look at the Old Icelandic material. This turned out to be not quite simple as there is no index. Navigating in the book is not very easy, too, as there are no page headers to assist in quickly finding a section.

One of the first things, that did strike me, was the fact, that the OIc words quoted were not uniformly normalized. The spelling found in the OIc manuscripts can be quite wild and that found in the oldest
manuscripts is significantly different from that found in the important 14th century saga manuscripts. Therefore all dictionaries, grammars, and reading editions employ a normalized orthography. However, regrettably not all the same.

Our knowledge of the Old Icelandic phoneme system is based on analysis of the spelling used in the manuscripts and on the so-called First Grammatical Treatise, which was originally written at the first part of the 12th century, predating the earliest extant manuscripts by several decades. Making use of minimal pairs the author of this work establishes a vowel system with a long, a short, and a (long) nasal subsystem. Of the latter only traces are left in the manuscripts, which might point to exemplars, which marked nasals.

The vowel system in stressed syllables in use at the onset of the manuscript tradition is the following

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/y/</th>
<th>/i/</th>
<th>/u/</th>
<th>/ê/</th>
<th>/ũ/</th>
<th>/ø/</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ø/</td>
<td>/ē/</td>
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<td>/ô/</td>
<td>/ā/</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>/ō/</td>
<td>/ē/</td>
<td>/ā/</td>
<td>/ǭ/</td>
<td>/i/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further there are the diphthongs /au/, /ey/ and /ei/.

This system underwent the following changes. /ā/ and /ǭ/ coincided around 1250, the result being written á (in mss also a). /ǫ/ and /œ/ coincided in the 2nd half of the 13th century, the result in normalized texts being written as ö, as in modern Icelandic. /æ/ and /ô/ coincided; the result is usually denoted as æ in normalized texts, as in modern Icelandic. In the case of /ō/ the manuscripts continue to use the various spellings for the two earlier phonemes. In the case of the merged /œ/ the manuscripts usually employ the traditional spellings for the old /œ/, but occasionally old /œ/ spellings linger. Those editors wishing to represent the old situation with /æµ/ and /œµ/ have chosen different notations for these phonemes. The spelling æ vs. œ has two drawbacks: in italics the two look almost the same, and although both vowels are long, there is no length mark as in the other long vowels, à, è, etc. Therefore Noreen and also the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (ONP) have chosen to use æ and œ.

In unstressed syllables only 3 vowels occur: /A/, /I/ and /U/. /A/ is identified with short /a/, while /I/ can be identified either with /e/ or /i/. As far as I know, no manuscript uses one of these identifications.