

## The Genesis of French Vowels: A Historical Phonetic Analysis

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**Abstract:** This article explores the historical formation of vowels in the French language and their place in the phonetic system. It examines the changes in vowel sounds during the Old, Middle, and Modern French periods, the loss of diphthongs, and the emergence of nasal vowels, all stemming from Latin. Based on text analysis, the abundance of vowels such as "e" (15-18%), "a" (7-9%), and "i" (6-7%) in contemporary French is identified. Factors such as the stabilization of nasal vowels, simplification of pronunciation, and the influence of the Parisian dialect are investigated. The distinct characteristics of French vowels compared to other Romance languages, particularly the nasal vowels [ã], [ɛ̃], [ɔ̃], [œ̃], are specifically highlighted. The research employs linguistic methods to analyze the evolution of French phonetics. The article makes a significant contribution to understanding the phonetic peculiarities of the French language.

**Keywords:** Vowels, French language, Romance languages, phonetics, sound system, accent marks.

### 1. Introduction

The French language, like other Romance languages, originated from Latin, and its phonetic system and the usage of sounds are unique. In these languages, vowels are fundamental elements, playing a crucial role in word structure and pronunciation. This article discusses the most frequently used vowels in French and Romance languages, their place in the language, and their historical development stages with examples, highlighting their significance. The frequent use of vowels among Romance languages is related to their phonetic structure and grammatical features. Among Romance languages, French widely uses vowels, accompanied by numerous pronunciation peculiarities. For instance, some vowel sounds may be dropped or not pronounced at the end of words. French also differs from other Romance languages through its nasal sounds, which lead to a more complex pronunciation of vowel sounds. It is estimated that vowel sounds constitute around 35-40% of French texts. The most frequently used vowel sounds (ranked by frequency) include "e," "a," "i," "o," "u," and "y." For example, *école* (school), *ami* (friend), *eau* (water), *nous* (we).

### 2. Methods and Materials

Analyzing the usage percentage of vowels in French texts reveals the following distribution:

1. "e" – approximately 15-18%: This is the most frequently used vowel sound in French. This letter appears often in unstressed positions, at the end of words, and in numerous grammatical forms.
2. "a" – approximately 7-9%: Widely used in French and considered one of the open sounds. It frequently occurs at the beginning of words and in stressed positions.
3. "i" – approximately 6-7%: Used within and at the end of words, especially in verb and noun forms.
4. "o" – approximately 5-6%: Primarily found in closed and open stressed sounds, but less frequent compared to other vowels.
5. "u" – approximately 4-5%: This sound is less common than other vowels and often appears within words.
6. "y" – approximately 0.5%: "y" is rarely used in French and mainly found in older or Latin-derived words.

### 3.Result

**Historical Development:** The development of French vowels and vowel sounds is a complex process encompassing several periods of the language's history. This development mainly covers three significant stages: Old French (9th-14th centuries), changes during the Middle French period (14th-16th centuries), and Modern French (from the 16th century onwards).

#### 1. Characteristics of Vowel Sounds in the Old French Period

Old French retained vowel sounds inherited from Latin. During this period, vowel sounds were phonetically richer and possessed the following characteristics:

**Broader Phonetic System:** Open and closed vowel sounds (e.g., [e] and [ɛ]) were clearly distinguished.

**Absence of Nasal Vowels:** Nasal vowels had not yet formed in Old French.

**Combinations of Two Vowels (Diphthongs):** Combinations not consisting of a single vowel sound (e.g., ai, au, ei) were widely used.

**Vowels Inherited from Latin:** The distinction between short and long vowels in Latin gradually disappeared. This process began during the Vulgar Latin period.

Example: The Latin word *caelum* (sky) was pronounced *ciel* in Old French.

Example: The Latin word *audire* (to hear) changed to *ouïr*.

#### 2. Changes in the Middle French Period (14th-16th Centuries)

Significant changes occurred in vowel sounds during Middle French. The characteristics of vowels in present-day French began to take shape and were preserved as a systematized form from this period.

**Emergence of Nasal Vowels:** Nasal vowels formed as a result of the combination of vowel sounds and nasal sounds.

What are nasal sounds? Nasal sounds are sounds during the pronunciation of which part of the air passes through the nasal cavity. The nasal vowels in French are:

- [ã] – the sound in the word "an" (sans [sã]).
- [ɛ̃] – the sound in the word "in" (vin [vɛ̃]).
- [ɔ̃] – the sound in the word "on" (nom [nɔ̃]).
- [œ̃] – the sound in the word "un" (un [œ̃]). For example, [ã], [ɛ̃], [ɔ̃].

**3. Characteristics of Vowel Sounds in Modern French.** By the 17th century, the vowel sound system of modern French can be considered fully formed. Several phenomena that arose during this period can be listed:

**Stabilization of Nasal Vowels:** What is stabilization? In the initial stage, nasal vowels were pronounced together with nasal consonants (e.g., m, n). Over time, nasal vowels gained their independence, and the consonants were dropped from pronunciation (e.g., *bonum* → *bon* [bɔ̃]). This process is called the stabilization of nasal vowels. For example, *vin* (wine) [vɛ̃], *bon* (good) [bɔ̃].

### 4.Discussion

**Factors Contributing to the Stabilization of Nasal Sounds:**

A) **Simplification of the Language:** Facilitating pronunciation processes was an important factor in the development of French. Difficulties in pronouncing nasal consonants (n, m) led to their dropping, but the preceding vowels retained their nasal character. For example: Latin: *bonum* [bo.num] → French: *bon* [bɔ̃].

B) **Dominance of Oral Pronunciation:** In the Middle Ages, the writing system lagged behind phonetic changes. As a result, in spoken language, the combination of nasal consonants and vowels transformed into nasal vowels. This increased the stability of pronunciation.

C) **Shortening of Pronunciation:** The shortening of words during pronunciation in French led to the stabilization of nasal sounds. Consonants at the end of words were dropped or weakened significantly. For example: Latin: *sanctum* → Old French: *saint* → Modern French: *saint* [sɛ̃].

D) **Influence of Regional Dialects:** Dialects of northern France (e.g., the *langues d'oïl*) played a significant role in shaping the stability of nasal vowels. These dialects eliminated consonants and added a nasal character to vowels to further simplify pronunciation.

E) **Change of Sounds Inherited from Latin:** Nasal vowels did not exist in Latin, but vowels that occurred with the consonants n and m transformed into nasal sounds in French as a result of their pronunciation changes. For example: Latin: *manus* → French: *main* [mɛ̃] (hand). Latin: *hominem* → French: *homme* [ɔ̃m] (man).

F) **Unique Phonetic System of French:** Nasal vowels in French are more distinctive compared to other Romance languages, and this was strengthened during the simplification of the language's pronunciation system. Such a system did not develop in other languages (e.g., Italian or Spanish).

- **Distinct System of Differentiated Sounds:** The pronunciation of each vowel sound became more precise, and the difference between nasal and oral vowel sounds was strengthened.
- **Open and Closed Vowels:** Open and closed forms of the same vowel sounds were differentiated (e.g., *é* [e] and *è* [ɛ]).
- **Vowel Reduction:** Diphthongs completely disappeared and transformed into monophthongs.

### 5. Differences in Vowels Between Old and Modern French

Feature	Old French	Modern French
Presence of Diphthongs	Yes (ai, au, ei)	No
Nasal Vowels	No	Yes (an, on, in)
Open/Closed Vowel Distinction	Weak	Clear (é and è)
Regulation of Pronunciation	Quite free	Standardized

### 6. Factors of Development.

• **Geographic and Dialectal Influence:** The dialects of Lorraine and Normandy significantly influenced the formation periods of the French language.

• **Social Influence:** The Parisian dialect became dominant, leading to the standardization of vowel sounds.

• **Simplification in Pronunciation:** Modern French pronunciation has diverged from its written form, and the sound system has simplified.

## 7. Conclusion

Vowel sounds hold a significant place in historical phonetics. The French language is distinguished by the richness of its vowel sound system. The vowels of this language, especially the nasal vowels, possess a unique sonority and pronunciation characteristics unlike those of other languages. Nasal vowels consist of four parts: [ã], [ɛ̃], [ɔ̃], [œ̃]. They are one of the important phonetic features of French, differentiating it when compared to other languages. The history of the French language's development consists of three main stages: Old French, Middle French, and Modern French. Significant changes occurred in the vowel sound system at each stage. For example, some vowels that existed in Old French later disappeared or transformed into other sounds. This process holds an important place in the history of vocalism. In the pronunciation of French vowels, the participation and position of the lips are also important. For example, vowels like [i] and [u] are permitted. During their pronunciation, narrowing and elongation of the lips are observed. These characteristics distinguish the pronunciation system of French from other languages. In conclusion, French belongs to the Romance languages, and its vowel sound system is an important object for a deeper study of its phonetic characteristics. The peculiarities in the vowels of this language are of great importance in its historical development and the formation of its phonetic system

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