For an integrative approach to variation and change in French nasal vowel systems
Zsuzsanna Fagyal, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In principle, phonological nasalization should be of little interest to Romance linguists, since the process by which it arises is largely universal: the nasality of syllable-final nasal consonants spreads through regressive assimilation to preceding nuclear vowels that, given the loss of the conditioning environment, become bimoraic long vowels and develop into phonemic nasal vowels. In reality, the complex dynamics driving the evolution of phonemic nasal vowel systems have long puzzled linguistic historians. This paper, focusing on French, discusses some of this rich complexity through a glimpse at internal (linguistic) and external (social) dynamics that, reportedly, led to the development of multiple, more or less distinct, nasal vowel systems in the language. Based on published and forthcoming research, it suggests that parallel findings from acoustic and articulatory phonetics (production), psycholinguistics (perception), and computational modeling could be aligned to shed new light on denasalization, mergers and shifts, and vowel height hierarchy, as some of the mechanisms behind well-attested historical and ongoing changes. Moving forward, the joint use of historical and experimental data, and computational modeling could become truly integrative, i.e., unifying and motivating research agendas, while remaining in constant dialogue about the role of physiological, psychological and social factors at play.