Among the different linguistic phenomena related to the study of Arabic linguistics and particularly its phonology and phonetics, we find one related to the analysis of the uvular stop [q]. This phoneme attracted the attention of early Arab grammarians as well as many orientalists and modern linguists for the different issues related to its evolution and treatment. We are going to explore here two of these.

First of all we are going to give a diachronic analysis of this segment in early Classical Arabic (CA henceforth) which is intended to determine its early phonetic realization. According to the descriptions of some early Arab grammarians (such as Sibawaih and Ibn Jinni) the [q] of CA had the phonetic value of [g]. Sibawaih for example describes it as majhuura (voiced) and as being articulated in ‘aqsā allisan wama fawqahu mina ḥānak al ḍālā’ (Al Kitāb, Vol 4, p. 433), i. e. as a velar. Following Sibawaih, Ibn Jinni gives the same description when he says ‘wa mimā fawqa dālika makhraju lqāf’ (Sir Senāfat al Ḥār, Vol 1, p. 278). Finally, Avicenna also describes it, in his ‘Rissāla’, as a velar when he says that it is realized in the place of articulation of [x]. But, when we look at the analysis of Ibn ya‘īch (Sharḥ al Mufassal, Vol 10, p. 124) we find that he puts it in the same place of articulation as [k] and defines this place as lahāt, i. e. the uvula.

I show that these descriptions run counter to the phonetic features of [q] of fusha Arabic known in modern linguistics, and in the traditional Quranic recitation, i. e. a voiceless uvular stop. Making another analysis of the descriptions made by the Arab grammarians, I show that the reasons behind this contradiction lie in our misunderstanding of the terms used by these last named, and not in their non comprehension of the manner of articulation of this segment. As an example, what Sibawayh calls ‘aqsā allān’ is defined by Al Farāhidi as ‘aqsa ḥālq’ and by Al layth in ‘At tahdīb’ as al lahāt, i. e. the uvula.

The second issue concerns the link that some linguists (Cantineau 1960, Jakobson 1957) made between the [q] and the emphatics. This link was done on the basis of the place of articulation of this segment which is uvular, and then guttural, which is not far from that of the secondary articulation of the emphatics, i. e. the pharynx. I will give a phonetic and acoustic analysis of the [q] through which I will show that this latter cannot be considered as an emphatic, and that the feature it shares with the emphatics is only acoustic. This acoustic feature is what is called in Arabic linguistics tafkhīm; a sort of grave resonance created by the shape of the oral cavity that is larger as in the emphatics. This large configuration is due, at the same time, to the back of the tongue which goes up to reach the uvula and to the front part of the tongue which goes down. If [q] had the phonetic value of [g] then Arab grammarians would not have included it among the mufaxama, since [g] does not have this acoustic feature.
References.