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W is for Wasta: A Grounded Theory for the Relationship Between Language and Culture

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Abstract: In the field of sociolinguistics, the relationship between language and culture has been discussed briefly in larger hypotheses (i.e. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis); however, the relationship (whether language influences culture, culture influences language, or no connection) has never been properly suggested through linguistic research and evidence. This research aimed to develop various grounded theories regarding the relationship between language and culture by analyzing semantic shifts for the Arabic word "wasta" (واسطة) used by Emirates today within the United Arab Emirates. The method utilized an online survey completed in Arabic by fourteen Emirati, native Arabic speakers. Of the fourteen responses, eight showed signs of a semantic shift that was not influenced by culture. As a result, the final grounded theory stated that "language is constantly evolving, but language and culture are not connected and do not influence each other". This study and its grounded theories are significant to the fields of sociolinguistics and semasiology as it provides a deeper insight into both how languages change over time and what factors do (or in this case, do not) influence them to change. Moving forward, further research should investigate the relationship between language and culture and replicate this study with larger samples and with words that have various meanings in other languages in order to compile more evidence to either support or oppose the final grounded theory.

Keywords: Arabic Linguistics, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Semasiology, Sociolinguistics, Wasta, Culture

1. Introduction

In the field of sociolinguistics, the relationship between language and culture has been discussed briefly in larger hypotheses (i.e. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis); however, the relationship (whether language influences culture, culture influences language, or no connection) has never been properly suggested through linguistic research and evidence. The research question guiding this study is "How does the perceived meaning of the Arabic word "wasta" (واسطة) by Emiratis suggest a relationship between language and culture?" The goal of this research is to identify possible semantic shifts influenced by culture for the word "wasta" used by Emiratis and utilize the data provided in order to establish a grounded theory about the relationship between language and culture. This research can contribute to the broader linguistic conversation by identifying how languages change over time and what factors might prompt these complex linguistic changes. In addition, the created theory can be used in discussions about how language and culture directly interact.

1.1. The United Arab Emirates (UAE)

It is important to understand the United Arab Emirates as it is the context of this study. The UAE is located on the Persian Gulf and is surrounded by the countries of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar. The UAE consists of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain [1]. The official language is Arabic; however, the UAE is a "diglossic speech community," which is defined by Bassiouney as "a community where people speak one language (Emirati dialect) but write another (Modern Standard Arabic)" [2].

For the purpose of this research, culture will be defined according to Wardhaugh, a linguist and professor at the University of Toronto, as "whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society" [3]. Defining the culture of each Emirate is a complex task that published literature has yet to discuss. However, this study will be analyzing language and linguistic shifts (later to be defined as semantic shifts) for individuals rather than a population (see 2. Method). Therefore, understanding the complexities

of each Emirate is not critical within this study.

1.2. Semantic Shifts

1.2.1. Meaning and Examples of Semantic Shifts

Semantic shift or semantic change refers to the way in which the meaning of a particular word changes over long or short stretches of time [4-5]. This is when the dominant element of meaning shifts to another meaning in new context. An example can be the word skyline, which used to mean a horizon but now refers to a horizon with skyscrapers [4].

1.2.2. Factors for Semantic Shifts

According to Egyptian linguist Abed Atwab (عبد التواب) there are non-intentional linguistic and extralinguistic factors that cause semantic shift [4]. Examples of non-intentional linguistic factors include a word being used in ambiguous context and the meaning of a word being misunderstood [4-5]. Social, cultural, and political development can act as extralinguistic factors that also contribute to semantic change, such as new political leaders or the introduction of a new culture into a society [4, 6-7].

1.2.3. Current Research for Semantic Shifts in the Arabic Language

The most common semantic shift in the Arabic language is abstract semantic extension, or when abstract meanings grow out of concrete definitions [5, 8]. Since the Arabic language is based on root etymologies, the meanings of words tend to be more tangible and concrete at first, then have the ability to shift to abstract uses [8]. However, AlBader and Beeston argue the naivety of Stetkevych's semantic extension theory because Arabic semantic shifts are more complex than the simplistic view of concrete meaning to abstract meaning [6, 9].

1.3. The Arabic Word "Wasta" – واسطة

1.3.1. Meaning of "Wasta"

Due to the fact that the word "wasta" (واسطة) is not easily translated to English, this research has utilized various sources and etymological derivations to define "wasta" (واسطة) as one that is in the middle, the mediator, or one who steers parties towards compromise [10-11]. However, commonly it is used as "favoritism," "nepotism," "connections," "influence," etc [12]. These phrases are similar but they deviate from the dominant element of meaning of "in the middle"; therefore, "wasta" is an ideal word to study through semantic change as it has various connotations and slant meanings. Currently, there is neither published literature analyzing the perceived meanings of the word "wasta" with Emiratis nor published literature relating "wasta" to semantic shifts.

1.3.2. Significance and Use of "Wasta" in the Arab World

"Wasta" is described in Western, academic literature as a type of nepotism that gives advantages based solely on their family, friends, coworkers, or other connections [11, 13]. Arab society is based on traditional, family values; so, the concept of "family connections" is fundamental to the success of Arabs in society [11]. The UAE is an Arab society; therefore, to "function in society" some Arabs use the knowledge and significance associated with "wasta" in order to thrive [3]. Hence, "wasta" is not only a linguistic term but also is part of the "culture" of the UAE [3].

However, other scholars and educated Arabs will argue that "wasta" does not exist any more within Arab society, because it stands and supports corruption [14]. The use of "wasta" is a violation of Islam although it is sometimes part of society [14-15]. The Quran is in classical Arabic and usually only the higher-class, educated can interpret the text. As a result, Arabs of lower socioeconomic status are unaware that utilizing "wasta" in society is against Islamic values which keep "wasta" in circulation within society. Despite more educated Arabs ignoring the idea of "wasta", research within the UAE concluded that younger generations tend to use the concept more than older generations; therefore, "wasta" is strengthening in Arab society rather than diminishing [16].

The applications of "wasta," such as in corporate environments, are beyond the scope of this study [11].

1.4. Relationship between Language and Culture

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that one's language determines their thoughts [17]. It is out of scope of this research to discuss the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in depth, but rather use the ideas that the hypothesis has prompted as a foundation to suggest the relationship between language and culture. There are three claims according to Wardhaugh derived from the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: the structure of a language determines the speaker's culture, the culture of people is reflected in their language, and a 'neutral' claim which is that there is little or no relationship between language and culture [3].

1.4.1. Language Influences Culture

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis argues for this claim as the relationship between language and culture is a deterministic one, one without free will [17]. A main concept that is used by linguists supporting this claim is that a community will only have the vocabulary for what their society will talk about [3, 17-18]. For example, a society without theology will have no need to create words to communicate those ideas; therefore, their language can define what their culture believes or does not believe in. The language drives what people "must know in order to function in order to function in a particular society" [3].

Yet, Edward Sapir, an anthropologist-linguist that co-developed the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, argues that language is a "symbolic guide to culture" and does neither influence nor define a culture [19]. Moreover, he argues that language can not define a culture when there are geographical, political, and economic factors which can fluctuate in the area [18].

1.4.2. Culture Influences Language

Unlike the claim that language influences culture, the

claim for culture emphasizes the dynamic state of a society with all of its components (language, culture, etc.) due to extralinguistic factors [18]. Little academic work has been published arguing that culture influences language. However, works have been published explaining how various extralinguistic factors may have influenced semantic shifts [4, 6-7]. Semantic shifts can be used in order to help suggest a relationship between language and culture, as they provide evidence of linguistic change that may or may not be due to certain extralinguistic factors (i.e. culture).

1.4.3. 'Neutral' Claim

This claim states that language and culture are not connected, as unrelated languages can share a single culture and sometimes one language belongs to many different cultures [18]. Culture is *what* a society thinks while language is *how* the society expresses themselves [18]. Therefore, language is simply a vehicle for ideas to be shared.

1.5 Current Gap in the Language and Culture Relationship

Broader attempts to relate language and culture over the last 100 years have failed due to lack of evidence [3]. Neither the language claim (*4.1 Language Influences Culture*), the culture claim (*4.2 Culture Influences Language*), nor the neutral claim (*4.3 'Neutral' Claim*) is based on factual evidence, only socio-philosophical principles and ideas. Not to mention, little information has been published with regards to semantic shifts and their direct relationship with culture and no studies have utilized Arabic semantic shifts as evidence of extralinguistic factors affecting language. For these reasons, this research will investigate the perceived meaning of "wasta" to identify any possible semantic shifts related to the word on an individual level. Then, the research will utilize these results in order to develop theories grounded in evidence about the direct relationship between language and culture.

2. Method

In order to answer the initial question and utilize the perceived meaning of the Arabic word "wasta" to develop a theory about the relationship between language and culture, a grounded theory study was used. The grounded theory approach aligns with the purpose of this study, as it is "to collect qualitative data and use them to develop a theory, which can be especially helpful when current theories about a phenomenon are either inadequate or nonexistent." [20]. This branch of methodology has a high external validity due to its direct connection with the subjects being studied, as Emirati's are being surveyed; therefore, the research can be applied to the "real world." Although qualitative research has a very low internal validity and does not have the ability to draw causal relationships due to the lack of controlled variables, the method can describe evidential observations and suggest new theories based on covariate evidence found through statistical calculations such as frequency and average. This research study will utilize the grounded theory study approach and will collect data using an online survey.

Through the online *Google Surveys*, a simple four-page survey was created in English then translated to Modern Standard Arabic. As this is a research study analyzing native Arabic, Emirati speakers, the survey must be in Arabic and answered in Arabic; therefore, subjects that declared themselves as non-native Arabic speakers and subjects that answered in English had their responses deleted. The four pages included (1) Description and Ethics, (2) Demographics Information, (3) Defining the Term "Wasta" (واسطة), and (4) [Describing the Culture of] Your Emirate.

In order to protect the privacy of subjects, emphasis was placed on confidentiality, anonymity, and untraceability; all of which were detailed on the first page before the subject began the survey. Although demographic information was asked for on page two (in order to analyze possible limitations of the study in case certain demographics were overrepresented), the survey did not ask for any personal identifiers (name, email, etc.). In addition, the first page explained that continuing with the survey implies consent; however, subjects had the right to withdraw from the survey at any time in order to protect subjects in case they did not feel comfortable with sharing their opinions.

Page three asks for the subject's personal definition for the word "wasta." The question was followed by some examples of possible answers to help guide subjects to define "wasta" in their own words. In addition, subjects were asked to either describe how they would use "wasta" or use it in a sentence to ensure that the connotation of their answer could be understood and later coded appropriately. Page four was similar to page three, in that it asks for subjects to describe their culture using adjectives that will later allow for simple coding to compare the definition (language) to the culture.

Due to the difficulty within the UAE for expatriates (the researcher) to communicate with Emiratis, the survey was distributed non-randomly through snowball sampling in order to increase sample size. However, this research does not aim to identify the opinions of the population but rather the effect of language and culture's relationship for the individual. More responses were encouraged in order to provide more validity and credibility to the findings, but they were not necessary. In addition, subjects did not need to represent all seven Emirates of the UAE. Describing the culture of one's Emirate rather than of the UAE was a choice to allow for a more specific culture to be defined rather than the complex, multicultural country as a whole.

After responses were recorded, the definitions and cultures were openly coded with an adjective (traditional/historical, educational, modern, political/power & authority, tribal, economic/development, social, and religious) according to their connotation. After open coding, the individual's response for the perceived definition and culture are analyzed to identify their interrelationships through selective coding in order to create a "storyline" and describe "what happens" in the phenomenon being studied [20]. The relationship between the coded definition and coded culture could be selectively coded one of three ways, as either no semantic

shift, a semantic shift, or a semantic shift influenced by culture. If the perceived definition was the same as the etymological definition and the culture was coded as traditional/historical, then the word (for that individual) did not undergo a semantic shift (see example in Table 1).

Table 1. *An example of a response with selective coding for no semantic shift.*

Sample Response	Open Coding - Definition & Example	Open Coding - Culture	Selective Coding (Relationship)- Level of Semantic Shift
A	Traditional/ Historical	Traditional/ Historical	No Semantic Shift

In order for there to be a semantic shift for the word "wasta," the respondent's perceived meaning had to differ from the etymological definition; therefore, the open coding for the definition could not be traditional/historical. However, if the open coding for the definition was not the same as the open coding for the culture, then the change in meaning was not influenced by culture and the response is selectively coded as only a semantic shift (see examples in Table 2).

Table 2. *Examples of responses with selective coding for a semantic shift, but not influenced by culture.*

Sample Response	Open Coding - Definition & Example	Open Coding - Culture	Selective Coding (Relationship)- Level of Semantic Shift
B	Political/ Power & Authority	Traditional/ Historical	Semantic Shift
C	Tribal	Economical/ Development	Semantic Shift

To determine if the shift was influenced by culture, the open coding for the culture would need to match the open coding for the definition and example in order to suggest that the culture could be a covariate for the semantic shift (see examples in Table 3). If so, the response is selectively coded as a semantic shift influenced by culture.

Table 3. *Examples of responses with selective coding for a semantic shift influenced by culture.*

Sample Response	Open Coding - Definition & Example	Open Coding - Culture	Selective Coding (Relationship)- Level of Semantic Shift
D	Social	Social	Semantic Shift Influenced by Culture
E	Tribal	Tribal	Semantic Shift Influenced by Culture

By following this sequence of open coding and selective coding, the individual responses can be analyzed in order to identify whether or not there has been a semantic shift and if it was influenced by culture. The frequency for each selective coding can then be compared to establish the most frequent level of semantic shift and develop three theories that best explain the main conclusions found from the evidence with varying levels of validity due to generalizability.

There will be three grounded theories created: one for the Arabic word "wasta," one for the Arabic language, and one for all languages. The first theory is for the Arabic word "wasta" and will be the most concrete as the evidence collected directly relates to the phenomenon being studied (i.e. the word's meaning). The second theory will have a lower validity and conclusiveness as it utilizes generalizations in order to apply the evidence for one word to an entire, complex language. The third theory will have the lowest validity and conclusiveness as it applies the large generalization that one Arabic word's behavior represents the behavior of all languages in response to the extralinguistic factor of culture. Yet, the two generalized theories are grounded in some evidence which provide validity and foundational support to the theories. Figure 1 shows the evaluation of these theories visually, as they increase in distance from the evidence and become broader, they decrease in validity and conclusiveness but are still supported by some evidential data. Each theory builds upon the other, with the third and final grounded theory being the one that answers the initial research question.
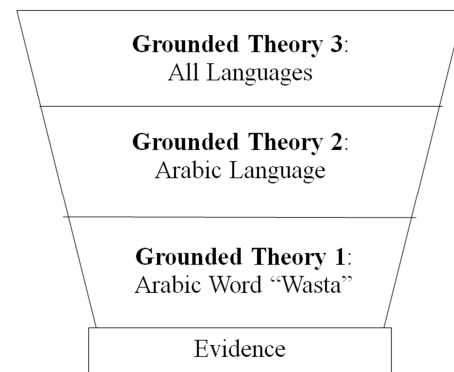

Figure 1. *Visual representation for the validity and conclusiveness of grounded theories. Grounded theories farther away from the evidence are more generalized and have lower validity and conclusiveness.*

3. Findings

After the survey was sent out to Emiratis throughout the UAE, seventeen responses were received yet three were deemed invalid due to participants answering in English. Table 4 shows simplified, translated versions of the responses.

Table 4. The simplified, uncoded responses from the survey.

Response	Simplified, Uncoded - Definition	Simplified, Uncoded - Example	Simplified, Uncoded - Culture
1	Pursuit of special knowledge from relatives, friends or friends of friends	Resolved conflict between [me and] my girlfriend	Traditional/ Social/ political/ religious
2	Link between two things that have common interest	[He] is the connection between two things	Ancient, Bedouin culture
3	Obtain positions and walk above [the] law	Wasta is relationships provided by illiterate parents	Tribal
4	Help someone to get his or her request	Means to complete transactions in companies	Modern Economical Development
5	I know a guy	The [medium] is above all	Economical
6	Easy way to get rid of work quickly	"You had a way of paying my debt,"	Historical, Religious, Social
7	Is the knowledge of the person in need of the means through people he knows	[He has] the ability to reach a goal without doing it [himself]	Economical
8	Wasta problem digest rights privileged	It uses a medium to move things faster than usual	Social/ Political/ Economic/ Historical/ Religious/ Tribal/ Modern
9	In the middle	A person who helps do things for people he knows	Social/ Tribal/ Religious
10	Facilitate someone's actions, but depends on his father or tribe	Send me your friend (the name of the influential person)	Historical/ Tribal
11	Connections	[He] helps people who are waiting	Social
12	Know someone with a strong position or relationships	Get what you want in the right way right or wrong	Modern Economical Development
13	Use of knowledge and social relationships to get something wrong	I was only able to enter [due to] my father's friend	Social and Modern
14	Favoritism	Ahmed got his brother Salam a job at the company	Social/ Tribal/ Religious

From this data, the responses underwent open coding; the definition and example were combined to categorize the definition while the culture was coded in isolation. Table 5 shows the coded responses. The responses were coded using the adjectives stated in the method section.

Table 5. The openly coded responses.

Response	Open Coding - Definition & Example	Open Coding - Culture
1	Traditional/ Historical	Traditional/ Historical
2	Traditional/ Historical	Traditional/ Historical
3	Political/ Power & Authority	Tribal
4	Social	Modern
5	Modern	Economical/ Development
6	Political/ Power & Authority	Traditional/ Historical
7	Tribal	Economical/ Development
8	Economical/ Development	Economical/ Development
9	Social	Social
10	Tribal	Tribal
11	Economical/ Development	Social
12	Social	Modern
13	Social	Social
14	Economical/ Development	Tribal

The data from Table 5 was analyzed using selective coding in order to identify the connection between the definition and culture in Table 6. If the definition was the same as the etymological definition, then the response showed no semantic shift. If the definition differed from the etymological meaning but the culture's open coding didn't match the definition's, then the response showed a semantic shift only. If the definition differed from the etymological meaning and the culture's open coding was the same as the definition's, then the selective coding for that response showed a semantic shift that was influenced by culture.

Table 6. The selectively coded responses used to identify the interrelationships between the definition and culture.

Response	Open Coding - Definition & Example	Open Coding - Culture	Selective Coding (Relationship) - Level of Semantic Shift
1	Traditional/ Historical	Traditional/ Historical	No Semantic Shift
2	Traditional/ Historical	Traditional/ Historical	No Semantic Shift
3	Political/ Power & Authority	Tribal	Semantic Shift
4	Social	Modern	Semantic Shift
5	Modern	Economical/ Development	Semantic Shift
6	Political/ Power & Authority	Traditional/ Historical	Semantic Shift

Response	Open Coding - Definition & Example	Open Coding - Culture	Selective Coding (Relationship) - Level of Semantic Shift
7	Tribal	Economical/ Development	Semantic Shift
8	Economical/ Development	Economical/ Development	Semantic Shift Influenced by Culture
9	Social	Social	Semantic Shift Influenced by Culture
10	Tribal	Tribal	Semantic Shift Influenced by Culture
11	Economical/ Development	Social	Semantic Shift
12	Social	Modern	Semantic Shift
13	Social	Social	Semantic Shift Influenced by Culture
14	Economical/ Development	Tribal	Semantic Shift

From the fourteen responses, two showed no semantic shift, eight showed a semantic shift, and four showed a semantic shift that was influenced by culture. Therefore, only 28.6% of the results suggested that the semantic shift might have been due to culture while 57.1% of the results exemplified a semantic shift but the culture didn't influence the change. Figure 2 models the three selective coding categories' frequencies among the responses.
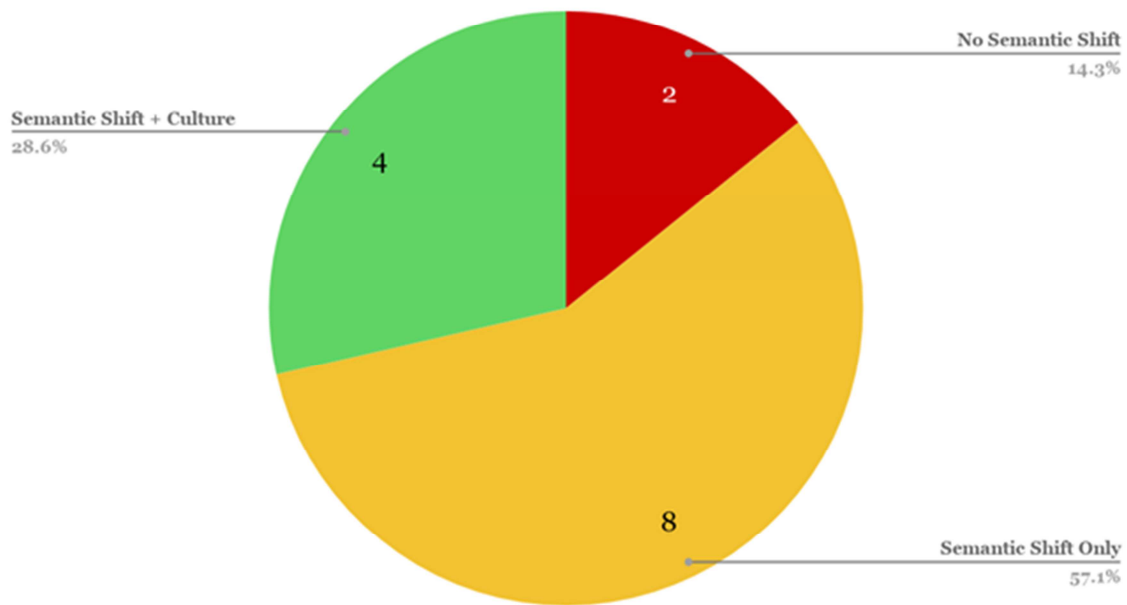

Figure 2. Percentage of responses per selective coding category.

4. Evaluation

The validity of this data and its possible limitations must be established before discussing the aforementioned findings, as they are the constraints on the generalizability of the conclusions found. The largest limitation of this study was the sample size; although the research question specifically related to language on an individual level instead of the entire UAE population, a larger sample size would have allowed for more robust findings and more concrete theories grounded in more supportive evidence. The reason for this limitation was most likely due to many Emiratis choosing not to respond to the survey since the topic of "wasta" is taboo, against Islam, and commonly unrecognized by highly educated Emiratis [14-15]. Nevertheless, the fourteen responses allow for enough analysis in order to suggest three theories.

Also, 64.2% of the respondents were between the ages of 35-44 and from the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, and 92.8% of the sample was male. The lack of variation within the sample could have led to skewed data, as there is a possibility that for middle-aged men certain extralinguistic factors influence changes in their language more than others. As languages are spoken by men and women of all ages, the lack of diversity in the data decreases the generalizability to the behavior of all languages.

In addition, there may be human error within the analysis of the responses. The researcher is not a fluent, native Arabic speaker; therefore, he might have misinterpreted possible nuances and connotations within the responses. Furthermore, the researcher innately exhibited a cultural bias as he was not raised within Arab culture. This might have resulted in him coding the data in a way that would have been different from an Arab or an Emirati researcher.

However, because this grounded theory study utilized a survey in its data collection method, the findings have a high external validity as they come directly from the Emiratis being studied. Hence, the grounded theories are based on evidence that encapsulates the language and cultures for Emiratis and is able to represent how language and culture

interact within a specific society.

5. Discussion

Since all but two responses showed a semantic shift, but only 28.6% showed signs of a semantic shift due to the extralinguistic factor of culture, then it can be concluded that the Arabic word "wasta" has undergone a semantic shift but it has not been due to culture. Since the majority of responses showed a semantic shift not due to culture, there must be another extralinguistic factor that has influenced the change in meaning for the word amongst Emiratis. From this conclusion, the first grounded theory can be established. Since the semantic shift represented by "wasta" showed that culture did not affect/change the meaning of the word, then the theory can be constructed:

The Arabic word "wasta" underwent a semantic shift, but was not due to the extralinguistic factor of culture.

Using both this theory and the evidence found, a second theory can be created surrounding the words in the Arabic language as a whole. The high frequency of semantic shifts from the word's concrete meaning (i.e. one who is in the middle) to an abstract meaning (ex: facilitator) within the responses further supports Stetkevych's abstract semantic extension theory to describe the behavior of how the Arabic language changes over time [8]. However, the first grounded theory claims that the semantic shift was not due to/influenced by culture; therefore, a grounded theory about the Arabic language as a whole is:

Arabic words evolve from concrete to abstract, but are not influenced by culture.

Then, the second grounded theory can be generalized and broadened in order to fit the behavior of all languages and explain the direct relationship between language and culture based on the evidence from this study. Assuming that the evidence and data from this study is applicable for all languages and since there is no evidence to show that other languages follow the same abstract semantic extension as Arabic, it can only be concluded that languages can evolve, which is evident through semantic shifts of all types. Therefore, the third and final grounded theory that answers the initial research question by utilizing the evidence analyzed through the perceived meaning of the word "wasta" to suggest a relationship between language and culture is:

Language is constantly evolving, but language and culture are not connected and do not influence each other.

This theory is similar to the 'neutral claim' derived from the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the idea that language and culture are unrelated, yet this theory is supported by evidence unlike the 'neutral claim' [18]. Furthermore, this theory affirms the idea that neither language influences culture nor culture influences language. Figure 3 visualizes how these three theories are grounded in both the evidence and each other.
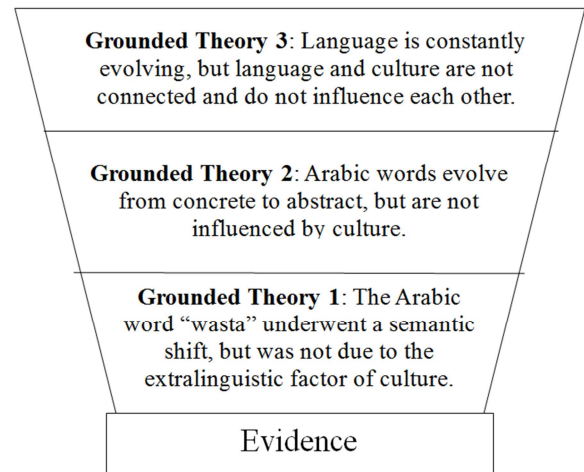

Figure 3. *Visual representation for how the theories are built on each other and the validity and conclusiveness of the grounded theories. Grounded theories farther away from the evidence are more generalized and broadened and have lower validity and conclusiveness.*

6. Conclusion

The grounded theories presented in this study, specifically the third grounded theory, argue that language and culture do not influence each other. The gap in the relationship between language and culture that was previously mentioned can be addressed by these grounded theories, as it provides some evidence within the topic that was previously absent allowing for a theory based on data rather than socio-philosophical principles. This study and its grounded theories are significant to the fields of sociolinguistics and semasiology as it provides a deeper insight into both how languages change over time and what factors do (or in this case, do not) influence them to change. The study has a high relevance as the increase in globalization has brought extensive cross-culture collaboration and international connections, so it is important to analyze how culture can influence one of society's key components (i.e. language).

Moving forward, further research should investigate the relationship between language and culture and replicate this study with larger samples and with words that have various meanings in other languages in order to compile more evidence to either support or oppose the third grounded theory. Next, linguists and researchers should also investigate other extralinguistic factors (psychological, political, geographical reasons) with a similar study method in order to determine which extralinguistic factors have more or less influence on how a language develops over time. The theory brought forth in this study can be used within discussions to create action plans regarding various linguistic issues, for example, the issue of endangered vernacular and whether or not they should be learned.

Language is at the heart of every society; therefore, studying how and why a language evolves also gives information about how societies transform over time.

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