膀 "*word*

膀, the regular Hindi word for ‘word’, is one of the first linguistic terms that a Hindi learner encounters. Being a Sanskrit loan, शब्द is little used in Urdu, which has instead the Arabic-through-Persian loan لفظ lafẓ; this singular form comes complete with its own plural, formed on the Arabic pattern by a repatterning of the triconsonantal root ٰل-ف-ظ al-fāţez, ‘words’.

Though शब्द means ‘word’ to you and me, its primary sense is ‘sound’; and even in the Hindi of today it may still have this meaning in a poetic context — for example in the ‘sound’ of a hammer striking the anvil, or of fingers striking a drum, or of rain falling on leaves. CDIAL hits the semantic nail on the head in glossing Sanskrit शब्द as ‘articulate sound’, and OHED’s first gloss specifies ‘sound, noise (esp. as produced by any action)’; thus the heart of the matter is a sound that means or indicates something, or is attributed to a known source. (It can be distinguished semantically from the Hindi word आहट, meaning a sound whose source is unseen, such as footsteps in a neighbouring room). Generally, though, शब्द has come to be equated with the semantic range of English ‘word’.

Just as शब्द has ‘sound’ as its basic meaning, so वाक्य, the usual Hindi word for ‘sentence’ or ‘clause’, literally means ‘vocable’; in fact ‘vocable’ is its cognate, as both words derive from the Indo-European root *wek-* ‘to say’. Thus वाक्य is literally an ‘utterance’. In the Indian tradition, speech rather than writing has long been primary. As for writing, the convention of spacing words out as separate items (rather than runningthemtogether as in the old manuscript traditions — and, for that matter, in speech) is a relatively recent one in many languages.

The introduction to शब्द mentioned tatsama > tadbhava sequences such as कर्म > काम, पुत्र > पूत्र, सप्त > सोंप, and चंद्र > चौंद्र, in which the reduction of a conjunct is accompanied by the lengthening of a preceding vowel; and if we to extend the same pattern here, we would logically arrive at शब्द > साद (bearing in mind that vernacular languages often replace Sanskritic श with a simple स). The tadbhava word साद does indeed exist, but is now archaic and is only found in old literary sources; tatsama शब्द is the current form of choice. As so often, high-register Sanskrit wins the day, and the poor old vernacular words are left without a मीत (< मित्र) to champion them.

The religious traditions that have nurtured both English and Hindi (separately, of course!) have done much business with the concept of ‘the word’. In the beginning was the Word, begins the gospel attributed to John. The original was in Greek, and the word for ‘Word’ was the philosophically charged term λόγος logos; for two millennia, the meaning of John’s statement has been the subject of more theological debate that you could shake a stick at. Similarly in the tradition of what we have come to call Hinduism, the pithy compound शब्दःequates ‘sound’ or ‘word’ with the universal spirit, and has likewise been given many different meanings by many different interpreters. Meanwhile in the context of Hindi and Panjabi vernacular
devotional poetry, a शब्द (usually spelt and pronounced शब्द, partly as a reflection of Panjabi pronunciation) is a bhajan, a devotional hymn; and in this context, the word comes close in meaning to another key term for (divinely inspired) utterance, वाणी (tadbhava वाणी). Here too the primary sense of the spoken word precedes that of a written, literary text.

Hindi words relating to linguistics are of course Sanskritic. We close with OHED’s generous list of terms and expressions based on शब्द –

शब्द śabd [S.], m. 1. sound, noise (esp. as produced by any action). 2. a word (spoken or written). 3. the word of God; the divine being as revealed through the Word. 4. a song, hymn (esp. among Sikhs: = सबब). 5. fig. the power of speech. 6. gram. a word, a term. — आ बनाना, to make a noise or sound (with, से), to sound, to blow. दो ~, m. two words: a few words (of conversation); a preface. - शब्दकार, m. composer of the words of a song. शब्द-कोश, m. word-store: dictionary. शब्दगत, adj. put into words, given verbal form. शब्द-वाच, m. word-thief: plagiarist. शदाध, f. plagiarism. शब्द-शबदार, m. the revealed Word, identified with the ultimate being; a Veda. शब्द-शब्दार, m. word-stock, lexicon (of a language). शब्द-भेद, m. a part of speech. भेदी, adj. sound-piercing: = शब्दशेखडी. शब्द-श्रोत, f. the source or origin of a word; gram. a root. शब्दरचना, f. ling. morphology. शमक, adj. शब्द-विधान, m. a partic. form or style of words or speech. शब्द-विनियास, m. word-arrangement: turn of speech, phraseology. शब्दशेखडी, adj. & m. piercing a target detected only by its sound (an arrow, or an archer). शब्दश, adv. word for word. शब्द-संग्रह, m. a vocabulary. शब्दत "['da + a']", m. gram. ending of a word. शब्दांवर "['da + ā']", m. high-flown language; bombast. शब्दवरक "['da + ā']", adj. concerning words, lexical. शब्दाल "['da + a']", adj. beyond the reach of sound: the supreme being; beyond the power of words (to express). शब्दानुभासन "['da + a']", m. instruction in the use of words: a grammar; a guide to language usage. शब्दार्थ "['da + a']", m. meaning of a word, or words; literal sense. शब्दार्थ-विधान, m. ling. semantics. शब्दालंकार "['da + ā']", m. rhet. an adornment or figure of speech depending for its effect on sounds (as alliteration, assonance) rather than on meanings. शब्दालंकार "['da + a']", f. terminology (of a partic. field); vocabulary (of a writer, or a partic. group). - शब्दाथशब्द [P. -ā-], adv. word for word, verbatim.

शब्दविचार śabdik [S.], adj. word for word, literal (sense, translation).