Hindi words, their meanings, their origins

To know something about where words come from enriches our appreciation of a language; and to discover patterns of connectivity between different languages adds greatly to our understanding of cultural history. The fact that Hindi ‘comes from’ Sanskrit is clear to all, but awareness of the historical connectivity between Hindi and English is less widely disseminated.

It is easy enough for anyone to draw a line between a दा and a dentist, or between नाम and name, or between दो and two or duality; but the link between the verbs होना and be, though equally real, is more deeply hidden. These connections are mapped out by philologists, but their discipline is a technical one whose findings are not always accessible to the layman, and the specialists’ heavy use of technical abbreviations may challenge ordinary readers. The intention of शब्दार्थ, therefore, is simply to dip a toe into the waters of philology, giving Hindi learners some examples of the connectivities between Hindi and English, and looking also at the internal connectivities within the Indic field, for example between रखना and रखा, or between सब and सत्य, or between सकना and शक्ति. How are दल group, party, बलित oppressed (caste) and बल lentils related? What is the common ancestry of the words सितार, तान, तंत्र, tone, tent, and tension? What is the chilly connection between हिमालय and hibernation? What resources offer the best help in pursuing the histories of these words? These are some of the Frequently Avoided Questions that शब्दार्थ seeks to address.

Guesswork can take us a little way in apprehending etymological connections, and folk etymologies can be wonderfully creative (I was once told that कंकड़ concrete was an Indic word deriving from कंकड़ and ईट, yielding a nicely logical compound meaning ‘gravel-brick’); but the philologist’s work involves a much more precise reading of evidence, and it detects patterns of derivation that enable linguistic history to be perceived — just as forensic detective work can lead from clues at the crime-scene to the reconstruction of ‘what happened’. My hope is that learners of Hindi can benefit from a modest introduction to a complex area that usually deters the general reader.

Patterns: when we know that Hindi काम work derives from Sanskrit कर्म action, we notice that the reduction of a conjunct to a single consonant may be accompanied by the compensatory lengthening of a preceding short vowel; and this same pattern explains पूर्व son (as in राजपूर्व) as deriving from पुत्र, and साप as deriving from सर्प serpent, and चाँद as deriving from चंद moon. The evidence of vernacular words even enables philologists to postulate the now-defunct Sanskrit words from which they must have derived.

The fact that both काम and कर्म exist in modern Hindi usage, but with different meanings, shows how a language is enriched by historical change; and on the other hand, the fact that today’s
Hindi features पुत्र (while पुत्र now sounds archaic) demonstrates the processes of Sanskritisation, in which ancient forms of a word are ‘borrowed’ back into the modern language.

Though awareness of the shared heritage of Indo-European languages has existed for centuries, many of the most valuable resources are quite recent. R.S. McGregor’s *Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* shows Sanskrit etymons (source words) in square brackets after the headword, as we see in the following openings to entries for पुत्र, रखना, and and सा#प. Note that Sanskrit verbs are traditionally quoted in their third-person singular form rather than in an ‘infinitive’; hence रक्षति he protects etc.

पुत्र pūt [putra-], m. a son.
रखना rakhnā [rakṣati], v.t. 1. to put, to place;
सा#प sāṁp [sarpa-], m. 1. a snake.

A broader picture of derivations from Sanskrit is to be found in R.L. Turner’s *Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*. The example below is a slightly simplified version of the entry for the headword अर्धत्रिया (अर्धत्रिया) — literally ‘half [less than] three’, i.e. 2½. We see how the Pali derivative of this Sanskrit word introduces the retroflexion (in अधड्डत्रिया) that remains a feature of the vernacular words that flow from it, including Hindi धार (ढाई). The entry also shows a moment of controversy when the editor disagrees with the *Critical Pali Dictionary* (CPD) in respect of one part of the derivation!

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The relatively new facility of being able to access these dictionaries online, and hence to search for items ‘globally’ rather than through headwords alone, is an enormous step forward. For example, we can use OHED as a reverse dictionary, searching for the word ‘sword’ and finding not only the abundance of Hindi words translated as ‘sword’ but also a wide range of references to the qualities of a sword, or idioms relating to swords and sword-play. The days when using a dictionary meant simply looking up a headword, and gratefully accepting its single entry, are behind us.

Hindi’s ancestral debt to Sanskrit is so obvious, and so clearly established, that it is tempting to regard this Sanskritic heritage as a closed system, complete unto itself; and the Hindi tradition does fondly promote the concept of शुद्ध हिन्दी as having a pedigree so ‘pure’ that it contains no hint of influence from beyond the subcontinent. But even Sanskrit has a past; it too comes from somewhere, and to recognize its place in the great sprawling map of Indo-European languages is
to take a great leap forward in the understanding of history and the migration of culture. To look further than Sanskrit in tracing the origins of individual words is a bridge too far for शब्दार्थ; but it is worth bearing in mind that when we ask the श्रम price of something in Hindi, we use a word which looks back not only to Sanskrit श्रम, but also to the even earlier history of an origin in Greek δραχμή — the drachma, well-known to those of us whose memories extend back beyond the ill-fated Euro.

Hindi is not, thank goodness, a ‘pure’ language (is there such a thing?) It includes everyday words that come from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, English, Portuguese, Chinese, Persian, Arabic, Turkish — to name only its main sources. Its very name is Persian.

Readers may wonder about the selection of words included in शब्दार्थ; it follows no systematic path in its selection of words; it is a ragbag of meditations on whatever words happen to have intrigued the fevered brain of the compiler.

Rupert Snell
Hindi Urdu Flagship
University of Texas at Austin
GLOSSARY etcetera

* marks a word or expression that is either reconstructed from later evidence (such as *girati, a reconstructed etymon for Hindi गिरता), or is a hypothetically possible form that does not actually occur (such as *बदना to close). OHED adds another convention, using an asterisk to specify which of several listed meanings of a word is the most common one; for example, the entry for शब्द şabd [S.], m. 1. sound, noise (esp. as produced by any action). *2. a word (spoken or written)’.

> indicates that the word before the sign is the origin of the word after it, e.g. क्षेत्र > खेत.

< indicates the reverse of the above: खेत < क्षेत्र.

calque — a loan translation; an expression adopted by translation from another language, such as Hindi भूमिकीय ग्लोबलिज़िशन globalization, or शुभ रात्रि goodnight!

cognate — describes a word having the same etymological history as another (such as है and be).

doublet — one of a pair of words that come from the same source but have entered the language at different times, often with different meanings or nuances (such as Hindi काम and कम).

etymon — a word from which a later word is derived: तार्किक शब्दिका the etymon of तार्किक शब्दिका.

homonym — each of two or more words having the same spelling but different meanings and origins (e.g. ‘rear’ – the back part of something and ‘rear’ to raise and care for; or लाल darling and लाल red).

Indic — relating to the culture and history of the Indian subcontinent without reference to its political borders.

Proto Indo-European (PIE) — the ‘lost’ or unrecorded language from which Indo-European languages are considered to have derived; its character is reconstructed by collating the evidence of derived words in later languages.

Sanskritic — belonging to the Sanskrit tradition, including the legacy of languages derived from Sanskrit.

tadbhava come-from-that — describing a vernacular word whose form differs from that of its parent word: see next.

tatsama same as that — describing a Sanskrit word used in its ‘unchanged’ form within a vernacular Sanskritic language (thus Hindi खेत is the tadbhava form of tatsama क्षेत्र). Typists: beware auto-correct, which may change tatsama to ‘satsuma’ in a heartbeat.

RESOURCES


Trawling the internet for examples of Hindi usage

शब्दार्थ takes examples of current Hindi usage from news headlines that have appeared on the internet from December 2014 and thereafter. Readers should bear in mind that headlines have their own rhetoric, and that their word-order may differ from that of more neutral usages: the headline इक के नवे में ये कथा कर बैठा इजीनियर! (used in the article on बैठना) positions the subject at the end of the line, so that the image of this Romeo lingers in our consciousness as the line ends. Similarly a more neutral version of the sentence शी जी से बदल जाएगी मोबाइल फोन की दुनिया (a headline from the article on बदलना) would be मोबाइल फोन की दुनिया शी जी से बदल जाएगी. Another example is करोड़पित बनने के चक्कर में युवती ने गाए डेढ़ लाख, in which the shocking figure of ₹150,000 is given emphasis by coming at sentence end (instead of before the verb).

The Hindi word for ‘headline’, incidentally, is सूखा, from Persian سَرخ surkh ‘red’, in reference to an old tradition of penning headlines in red ink; compare the English word ‘rubric’, from the Latin rubrica ‘red ochre’, similarly used. (The word ‘rubric’ itself is cognate with Hindi/Sanskrit रूढ़िर red-coloured; blood, the Proto Indo-European root being *rudhro.) As you may notice, the habit of tracing words to their source, and of looking for connections and patterns between words, can become quite obsessive. You have been warned!