The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about spring cleaning

掃
Putonghua pronunciation: sao3
Cantonese pronunciation: so3
Meanings: brush, sweep

Ideogram 掃 = 手 (手 shou3, hand/arm) + 址 (zhou3, broom). 婦 (fu4, women) do housework, 掃地 (sao3 di4 = sweep-the-floor), hence characters 婦 and 掃 both contain 址 (= 掃帚 = sao3 zhou3 = sweeping-broom). 大掃除 (da4 sao3 chu2 = big-sweep-remove) = big-scale clean-up of rubbish/clutter.

Police 掃蕩 (sao3 dang4 = sweep-sway/wash = raid) vice dens, 掃射 (sao3 she4 = sweep-shoot = conduct high-speed firing/strafing on) criminals. Tumor needs 掃瞄 (sao3 miao2 = sweep-watch = scanning). Lavish tourists 掃貨 (sao3 huo4 = sweep-up-goods = buy like crazy), otherwise 掃興 (sao3 xing4 = sweep-away-enjoyment = feel disappointed).

Idiom 各家自掃門前雪 (ge2 jia1 zi4 sao3 men2 qian2 xue3 = each-family-self-sweep-door-front-snow) means coldly/selfishly ignoring/dismissing neighbors'/others'/affairs'/troubles.

by Diana Yue