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 baths and showers

擦 (radical 手 = hand, shou3, hand) means 擦 (kai3 ca1 = swipe/wipe-rub/brush/scrub) with hand/cloth/utensil: 揩臉 (ca1 lian3 = wipe/clean-face), 擦手 (ca1 shou3 = wipe-hands), 擦地 (ca1 di4 = scrub-the-floor). 磨擦 (mo2 ca1 = rub-scrub) = friction/quarrel.

Bathhouse/spa offers services: 擦身 (ca1 shen1 = scrub-body), 擦背 (ca1 bei4 = scrub/massage-back), 擦去 (ca1 qü4 = scrub/scrape-away) dead skin, 擦油 (ca1 you2 = rub-on-oil/lotion). However, 擦肩而過 (ca1 jian1 er2 guo4 = rub-shoulders-and-pass) means narrowly missing someone/chance.

擦亮眼睛 (ca1 liang4 yan3 jing1 = rub-bright-eyes-pupils) means closely/keenly watching events/facts/truth unfold. Slandered person wants to 洗擦污名 (xi3 ca1 wu1 ming2 = wash-scrub/clean/cleanse-dirty-name). Cantonese colloquialism 擦鞋 (ca1 xie2 = brush/shine-shoes) means flattery, licking someone’s ass.

by Diana Yue