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

Putonghua pronunciation: ma1, mo3, mo4
Cantonese pronunciation: moot3
Meanings: wipe, erase, efface, obliterate, swipe, coat over

抹 (radical 才 = 手 shou3, hand) pronounced ma1 means wipe. Towels are for 抹脸 (ma1 lian4 = wiping-face), 抹身 (ma1 shen1 = wiping/drying-body), handkerchiefs for 抹泪 (ma1 lei4 = wiping-away-tears) with handkerchief. Cleaner 抹窗 (ma1 chuang1 = wipes/cleans-windows) with抹布 (ma1 bu4 = wiping-cloth/rag).

揩抹 (kai1 mo3 = rub-wipe) = wife/coat/slash/swipe. 塗脂抹粉 (tu2 zhi1 mo3 fen3 = smudge-rouge-coat-powder) describes woman/cosmetician applying make-up or propagandist glossing over faulty issue, opposite of 抹黑 (mo3 heil = coat-black = blacken/demonize). 抹頸自殺 (mo3 jing3 zi4 shal = wipe-neck-self-kill) = slash one’s own throat with knife and commit suicide.

轉彎抹角 (zhuan3 wan1 mo4 jiao3 = turn-bend-press-corner) describes fast car turning bends or speaker beating about the bush.

by Diana Yue