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 winter clothes

毛
Putonghua pronunciation: mao2
Cantonese pronunciation: mo4
Meanings: hair, fur, feather, wool

毛 = 體毛 (ti3 mao2 = body-hair): tiger’s 皮毛 (pi2 mao2 = skin-hair = fur), eagle’s 羽毛 (yu3 mao2 = feather-hair = feathers), singular 一根羽毛 (yi1 gen1 yu3 mao2 = one-quantifier-hair = a feather). 長毛象 (chang2 mao2 xiang4 = long-hair-elephant) = mammoth. 毛筆 (mao2 bi3 = hair-pen) = Chinese-style writing/painting-brush.

毛 also means wool-like/superficial. 毛巾 (mao2 jin1 = woolly-kerchief) = towel. 毛利 (mao2 li4 = surface-profit) = gross profit. 毛病 (mao2 bing = surface-illness) = fault/blemish. 吹毛求疵 (cui1 mao2 qiu2 ci1 = blow-fur/feathers-for-blemish) = excessively fault-finding.

羊毛 (yang2 mao2 = sheep’s-wool) is woven into 毛線 (mao2 xian4 = woolen-threads/yarn), 毛衣 (mao2 yi1 = woolen-clothes), 毛毯 (mao2 tan3 = woolen-blankets).

by Diana Yue