

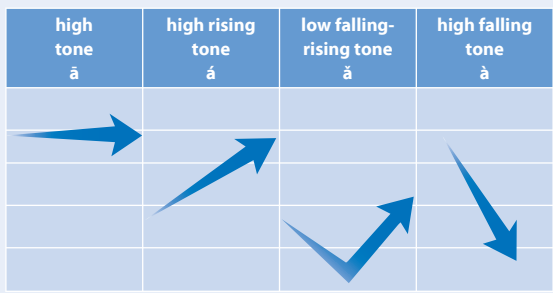
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Mandarin



tones

Mandarin is a tonal language ('tonal quality' refers to the raising and lowering of pitch on certain syllables). Mandarin is commonly described as having four tones, as well as a fifth one, the neutral tone. Apart from the unmarked neutral tone, Pinyin (the official system of writing Chinese using the Roman alphabet) uses symbols above the vowels to indicate each tone, as shown in the table below for the vowel 'a'. Bear in mind that the tones are relative to the natural vocal range of the speaker, eg the high tone is pronounced at the top of one's vocal range. Note also that some tones slide up or down in pitch.



The tonal quality plays a crucial role in distinguishing the meaning of words in Mandarin. For instance, the table below shows how the same combination of sounds, **ma**, can have five different meanings depending on the tone.

Tone	Example	Meaning
1st – high	mā	mother
2nd – high rising	má	hemp
3rd – low falling-rising	mǎ	horse
4th – high falling	mà	scold
neutral	ma	question marker