

# Character Builder 您好嗎？

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:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> 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 the face

Putonghua pronunciation: *er3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *yi5*

Meanings: ear

We use 耳朵 (*er3 duo1* = ear~piece = ears) to 聆聽 (*ling2 ting4* = listen~hear). 聾 (radical 耳, *long2* = deaf) people need 助聽器 (*zhu4 ting4 qi4* = help~hear~instrument = listening aids). 耳垢 (*er3 gou4* = ear~dirt) = ear-wax. Music is 悅耳 (*yue4 er2* = pleasing-to-the-ear) or 刺耳 (*ci4 er2* = pierce~ear = ear-jarring). 打耳光 (*da2 er3 guang1* = hit~ear-light) = slap-on-the-face. 吃耳光 (*chi1 er3 guang1* = eat~slap = getting slapped) is embarrassing.

Gang-leaders have 耳目 (*er3 mu4* = ears~eyes = informants). Foolish rule-breaker 掩耳盜鈴 (*yan2 er3 dao4 ling2* = cover~ears~steal~bell = believes his obvious theft/act is unnoticed), dismisses advice like 耳邊風 (*er3 bian1 feng1* = ear~side~wind = the passing wind).