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 looking pretty

髮

Putonghua pronunciation: fa4
Cantonese pronunciation: faat3
Meanings: hair on the head

美容 (mei3 rong2 = beautify-visage = cosmetology) includes 美髮 (mei3 fa3 = beautify-hair = hair-treatment/design), 剪髮 (jian2 fa3 = scissors/cut-hair = haircut), 洗髮 (xi3 fa3 = wash/shampoo-hair), 染髮 (ran3 fa3 = dye/color-hair).

理髮師 (li3 fa3 shi1 = treat-hair-master = barber/hairdresser) wields 梳子 (shu1 zi0 = comb-diminutive), shapes 髮型 (quan1 fa3 = curly-hair), 辫子 (bian1 zi0 = pigtail). 髮型 (gao1 ji4 = high-hair-bun) is classical-style coiffure. 剃髮 (xue1 fa3 = cut/shave-off-hair) = monk/nun's tonsure. 假髮 (jia3 fa3 = false-hair) = wig. 怒髮衝冠 (nu4 fa3 chong1 guan1 = angry-hair-rush/raise-hat) describes angry man's hair standing on end. Poetic image 白髮三千丈 (bai2 fa3 san1 qian1 zhang4 = white-hair-three-thousand-yards) invokes worry-laden man's hoary visage.

by Diana Yue