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

眼
Putonghua pronunciation: yan3
Cantonese pronunciation: ngaan5
Meanings: eye

眼 = 目 (mu4). 白眼 (bai2 yan3 = white-eye) = disdainful/discriminatory expression/attitude. 眼紅 (yan3 hong2 = eye-red) means envious/jealous. 目光遠大 (mu4 guang1 yuan3 da4 = eye-light-far-big) means having far-reaching vision.

Women 畫眉 (hua4 mei2 = draw/paint-eyebrows), apply 眼線 (yan3 xian4 = eye-liner), 眼影 (yan3 ying3 = eye-shadow), 睫毛液 (jie2 mao2 yi4 = eye-lash-hair-liquid = mascara). 眼淚 (yan3 lei4 = eyes' tears) ruin 眼部化妝 (yan3 bu4 hua4 zhuang1 = eye-part-transform-makeup = eye-makeup).

鳳目 (feng4 mu4 = phoenix-eyes) = beautiful slanting eyes. 杏眼圓睜 (xing4 yan3 yuan2 zheng1 = apricot-eyes-round-wide-open) describes pretty woman’s angry wide-eyed stare. Lovely woman’s charming glances make poet exclaim: “美目盼兮!” (mei3 mu4 pan4 xi1 = beautiful-eyes-glance-ah!)

by Diana Yue