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

嘴
Cantonese pronunciation: jui2
Meanings: mouth

嘴 (= 口 kou3) is linked to 唇 (chun2, lips), 齿 (ci3, teeth), 舌 (she2, tongue). 饕嘴 (can2 zui3 = lusty-for-food-mouth) = food-craving. 長舌婦 (chang2 she2 fu4 = long-tongue-woman) = gossipy woman. Idiom 唇亡齒寒 (chun2 man2 ci3 han2 = lips-die-teeth-cold) means state/person’s collapse endangers its/his neighbor/ally.

Women apply 唇膏 (chun2 gao1 = lip-paste/balm = lipstick), use香水 (xiang1 shui3 = aromatic-water = perfume) to camouflage 口臭 (kou3 chou4 = mouth-stink = bad breath), 嫣然一笑 (yan1 ran2 yi1 xiao4 = beautifully-ly-a-smile = flashes a charming smile).

樱桃小嘴 (ying1 tao2 xiao2 zui3 = cherry-fruit-little-mouth) = woman’s red-lipped little mouth. 血盆大口 (xue3 pan2 da4 kou3 = blood-basin-big-mouth) = monster’s wide-open mouth showing blood-red gums.

by Diana Yue