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

膚

Putonghua pronunciation: fu1
Cantonese pronunciation: foo1
Meanings: skin

膚 = 皮膚 (pi2 fu1 = leather/skin-skin). Genes/nutrition affect 膚色 (fu1 se1 = skin-color). 皮毛 (pi2 mao2 = skin-hair/down/fur = superficial) knowledge is 膚淺 (fu1 qian3 = skin-shallow = without depth).

Women hate 皺紋 (zou4 wen2 = wrinkle-line = wrinkles), 雀斑 (que4 ban1 = bird-stripe/spot = freckles), use 緊膚水 (jin3 fu1 shui3 = tighten-skin-water/lotion), 面膜 (mian4 mo2 = face-membrane = face masks), 面霜 (mian4 shuang1 = face-frost = face-cream) for 護膚 (hu4 fu1 = protect-skin = skin-care). 臉如凝脂 (lian3 ru2 ning2 zhi1 = face-resembles-coagulated-lard/cream) describes lovely woman’s creamy smooth face.

When looking 憔悴 (qiao2 cui4 = sickly-unwell), put on 胭脂 (yan1 zhi1 = rouge), 口紅 (kou3 hong2 = mouth-red = lipstick)!

by Diana Yue