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 the tastes

鹹 (radical 齒 lu = soy-sauce marinade)
Putonghua pronunciation: xian 2
Meaning: salty

鹽 (yan 2 = salt), 醬油 (shi you 42 = fermented-soy-bean-oil = soy sauce), 蠔油 (hao you 22 = oyster-oil/sauce) give 鹹味 (xian wei 24 = salty-taste). Chinese people eat 鹹魚 (xian yu 22 = salt-fish), 鹹蛋 (xian dan 24 = salty-egg = salt-preserved duck’s eggs). Fish/crustaceans are abundant at 鹹淡水交界 (xian dan shui jiao jie 24314 = salty-unsalty-water-cross-border = where sea-water meets river-water).

Cantonese colloquial term 鹹濕 (xian shi 21 = Cantonese haam sap 41 = salty-wet) describes men’s lusty thoughts/looks/gestures/words/actions or pornography.

品㕴 (pin wei 34 = appreciate-taste) = taste/discrimination for food/art/clothes. 倒翻五味架 (dao fan wu wei jia 31344 = tumble-upset-five-tastes-stand = upset condiments) means overwhelmed by mixed jealous/angry/bitter/sad feelings.

by Diana Yue