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 right and wrong

非
Putonghua pronunciation: fei1
Cantonese pronunciation: fei1
Meanings: not, non, undo

非 = 不 (bu4, not): 非常 (fei1 chang2 = not-usual = very/extraordinary), 非法 (fei1 fa3 = il-legal), 非禮 (fei1 li3 = non-rites/polite/descent = molest), 非常時期 (fei1 chang2 shi2 qi1 = not-ordinary-time-period, e.g. curfews). 非人生活 (fei1 ren2 sheng1 huo2 = not-human-born-live) = poor/deprived life. 非驢非馬 (fei1 lu2 fei1 ma3 = neither-donkey-nor-horse) describes inaccurate portrayal/imitation.

Fallacies 似是而非 (si4 shi4 er2 fei1 = resemble-correct-yet= are-wrong). Hypocrites 口是心非 (kou3 shi4 xin1 fei1 = mouth-yes-heart-no = say one thing, think/plot another). 是非 (shi4 fei1 = right-wrong) = gossip concerning 誰是誰非 (shei2 shi4 shei2 fei1 = who's-right-who's-wrong).

非殖民地化 (fei1 zhi2 min2 di4 hua4 = undo-plant-people-land-transform = decolonization) gives colony independence.

by Diana Yue