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 spring cleaning

丢失 (diu1)
Cantonese pronunciation: diu1
Meanings: drop, lose, discard, neglect

丢失 = lose/neglect. Firewood丢失 (diu1 jin4 = is-thrown-into) furnace. Wallet丢失 (diu1 shi1 = drop-lose = is lost/gone). Bombed soldier丢失了條腿 (diu1 le0 tiao2 tui3 = lost-ed-a-leg). Vacated house丢失 (diu1 kong1 = is-left-empty). Without practice, skills丢失 (diu1 huang1 = are-left-un-worked/rusty).

Spy丢失眼色 (diu1 ge4 yan3 se1 = throw-one-eye-color = throws a knowing/hinting glance) at co-worker. Dishonored guy丢失 (diu1 ren2 = lose-person) =丢失脸 (diu1 lian3 = lose-face).

In New Year holidays,丢失 (diu1 qi4 = discard-abandon) useless stuff,丢失 (diu1 xia4 = put-down) work. Don’t丢失女友 (diu1 kai1 nü3 you3 = put-aside-girl-friend). Never丢失掉梦想 (diu1 diao4 meng4 xiang3 = throw-away-dreams-ideas = abandon your dreams!)

by Diana Yue