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 electricity

Putonghua pronunciation: ming2
Cantonese pronunciation: ming4
Meaning: bright, clear, vivid, understand, enlightened, clarity

明 (日 ri4, sun + 月 yue4, moon) symbolizes brightness/clarity of vision/mind: 亮明 (ming2 liang4 = bright-shining) eyes, 鮮明 (xian1 ming2 = fresh-vivid) impression, 明顯 (ming2 xian3 = clear-obvious) fact, 明確 (ming2 que1 = clear-definite) proof. 明星 (ming2 xing1 = bright-star) also means movie-star.

聰明人 (cong1 ming2 ren2 = intelligent-bright-person) 明白 (ming2 bai2 = brilliant-white/plain = understands) right and wrong. 光明 (guang1 ming2 = light-brightness) symbolizes good/righteousness. Sinner 染暗投明 (qi4 an4 tou2 ming2 = abandon-darkness/evil-join-brightness = gives up bad ways/influences, joins good/righteous cause). 明主 (ming2 zhu3 = bright-master) means enlightened ruler.

明喻 (ming2 yu4 = obvious-comparison = similes) compare enlightening teacher/teaching to 明鑑 (ming2 ming4 = bright-mirror), 明煜 (ming2 deng1 = brightly-shining-lamp).

by Diana Yue