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 lovers

癡
Putonghua pronunciation: chi1
Cantonese pronunciation: chi1
Meanings: stupidity, dementia, idiocy, obsession, fixation, devotion

癡 = psychological fixation: 情癡 (qing2 chi1 = love-fixated = obsessed lover), 書癡 (shu1 chi1 = books-fixated = person obsessed with books/reading). 癡情 (chi1 qing2 = obsessed-love = 癡心 chi1 xin1 = obsessed-heart) describes unswervingly devoted lover. Lad with Oedipus complex 癡戀 (chi1 lian4 = obsessedly-loves) his mother.

Icon’s smile makes fans 癡迷 (chi1 mi2 = fixated-infatuated). Icon’s kiss makes fan 癡了 (chi1 le0 = fixate-ed = stunned dumb). 癡漢 (chi1 han4 = fixated/stupid-man) = stupid idiot. 老年癡呆症 (lao3 nian2 chi1 dai1 zheng4 = old-age-fixated-slow-witted-illness) = Alzheimer’s disease.

Fanatics have 癡心妄想 (chi1 xin1 wang2 xiang3 = obsession-heart-fantasy-thought = un-wise/unrealistic aspirations). Buddhism says貪瞋癡 (tan1 chen1 chi1 = greed-anger-lack-of-wisdom) poison man’s nature.

by Diana Yue