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 blind groping

瞎
Putonghua pronunciation: xia1
Cantonese pronunciation: hat6
Meanings: blind

Radical 目 (mu4, eye) in characters indicates eyesight: 眼 (yan3, eye), 看 (kan4, see/look/watch). 瞎 (xia1, blind) = 目 (mu4, eye) + 害 (hai4, harm). 瞎's synonym 盲 (mang2, blind) = 亡 (wang2, die/dead) + 目 (mu4, eye).

瞎子 (xia1 zi0 = blind-son/person = 盲人 mang2 ren2 = blind-people) learn/use 盲文 (mang2 wen2 = blind-writing = Braille). Uninformed people 瞎猜 (xia1 cai1 = blindly-guess). Liars 瞎说 (xia1 shuo1 = blind-say = bluff). 瞎眼 (xia1 yan3 = blind-eyed) = 盲目 (mang2 mu4 = blind-eyed) = blind/insensitive to reality. Ignorant worshippers 盲從 (mang2 cong2 = blindly-follow/obey) leader.


by Diana Yue