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 hair

髮 (radical 彈 bia1, hair drooping) = 頭髮 (tou2 fa3 = head’s hair): 長髮 (chang2 fa3 = long-haired), 剪髮 (jian3 fa3 = scissors-cut/trim-hair), 披頭四 (pi1 tou2 si4 = loose-hair-four = The “Beatles”-transliterated) 披頭散髮 (pi1 tou2 san4 fa3 = droop-hair-loosen-hair = keep long, loose hairstyle).

結髮夫妻 (jie2 fa3 fu1 qi1 = tie-hair-husband-wife) = wedding couple tying their hair together with a knot, hence 髮妻 (fa3 qi1 = hair-wife) means legal wife. 秀髮如雲 (xiu4 fa3 ru2 yun2 = fine-hair-resemble-cloud) describes woman’s rich/beautiful hair.

脫髮 (tuo1 fa3 = fall-off-hair = balding) person 然髮 (zh1 fa2 = plants-hair), uses 假髮 (jia3 fa3 = false-hair = wig/hair-piece).

落髮 (luo4 fa3 = drop/discard-hair) means Buddhist monk/nun’s tonsure.

by Diana Yue