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

猜
Putonghua pronunciation: cai1
Cantonese pronunciation: chaai1
Meanings: guess, suspect, conjecture

猜 means 猜測 (cai1 ce1 = guess-check) = 猜度 (cai1 du4 = guess-measure) = guess/guesswork. 猜想 (cai1 xiang3 = guess-idea) = conjecture/supposition.

猜謎語 (cai1 mi2 yu3 = guess-puzzle-words) = guess/solve puzzle’s clues: 猜中 (cai1 zhong4 = guess-hit-the-mark = guess right), 猜錯 (cai1 cuo4 = guess-wrong), 瞎猜 (xia1 cai1 = blindly-guess), 亂猜 (luan4 cai1 = confused-guess = make wild guesses).

In Chinese game 猜拳 (cai1 quan2 = guess-wrist/ closed-fingers), players guess how many fingers everyone will stick out; player who says correct number wins.

Jealous husband 猜疑 (cai1 yi2 = guess-suspect = suspects) wife, 猜忌 (cai1 ji4 = suspects-distrusts) male friends. 兩小無猜 (liang3 xiao3 wu2 cai1 = two-small-no-suspicion) describes young boy-girl couple enjoying sweet/innocent childhood friendship.

by Diana Yue