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

Putonghua pronunciation: pian1
Cantonese pronunciation: pin1
Meanings: tilted, off main track, aside, lop-sided, biased

偏 = remote/biased; 偏遠 (pian1 yüan3 = remote/faraway) areas, 偏激 (pian1 jī1 = bent-agitated = un-balanced/radical) views. 不偏不倚 (bu4 pian1 bu4 yi3 = no-bias-no-leaning) = unbiased/impartial. 中間偏左 (zhong1 jian1 pian1 zuo3 = middle-space-bent-left) describes middle/neutral-left political stand.

Parent with 偏見 (pian1 jian4 = biased-view/prejudice) 偏愛 (pian1 ai4 = particularly loves) one child. Old-fashioned education 偏重 (pian1 zhong4 = lop-sided-heavy/focus = over-emphasizes) rote-learning. Adverb 偏偏 (pian1 pian1 = biased-biased) means exactly/just as luck/ill-luck would have it. “我偏不去!” (wo3 pian1 bu4 qü4 = “I-just-won’t-go!”)

瞎子摸象 (xia1 ziO mo1 xiang4 = blind-persons-touching-elephant to guess animal's appearance) results in 以偏蓋全 (yi3 pian1 gai4 qüan2 = with-side-cover-full = a partial/incomplete/distorted picture).

by Diana Yue