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

梳 (radical 木 m4, wood) = 梳箄 (shu1 bi4 = comb-dense-teeth-comb), 梳子 (shu1 zi0 = comb-diminutive = comb): 木梳 (mu4 shu1 = wooden-comb), 骨梳 (gu3 shu1 = bone-comb). 梳洗 (shu1 xi3 = comb-wash) = 梳頭洗臉 (shu1 tou2 xi2 lian3 = comb-our-hair-wash-our-face) = morning toilettte.

Women 梳妝打扮 (shu1 zhuang1 da3 ban4 = comb-toilette-dome-ke-up = groom hair, deck-up face/body): 電髮 (dian4 fa3 = electric/electrify-hair = perm hair), 梳辮 (shu1 bian1 = comb/wear-braid/plait/pigtail), 梳髻 (shu1 ji4 = comb-bun-shaped-hair = do hair up into a bun/bobtail).

Detective 梳理 (shu1 li3 = comb-arrange = analyzes/clarifies) cues/arguments. Olden-day Cantonese housemaids 梳起唔嫁 (shu1 qi3 ng2 jia4 = Cantonese “soh1 hei2 ng2 ga3” = comb-up-hair-no-marry = lead spinster’s life).

by Diana Yue