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 making selections

質
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi4 Cantonese pronunciation: jat1
Meaning: matter, quality, nature, substance


質檢 (zhi4 jian3 = quality-check/control) shows imported oil's 質素 (zhi4 su4 = quality-element = quality) is 高質 (gao1 zhi4 = high-quality), not 劣質 (lie4 zhi4 = poor-quality). Deli guarantees steaks' 肉質 (bu4 zhi4 = meat-quality).

Beauty contest's highly-selective 性質 (xing4 zhi4 = nature-quality = nature/purpose) puts strict requirements on competitors' 資質 (zi1 zhi4 = resources-quality = talents), 氣質 (qi4 zhi4 = air-quality = temperament).

by Diana Yue