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 precious stones

晶 (三日 ri4, suns) means crystal-clear/bright. Stars are 亮晶晶 (liang4 jing1 jing1 = glowing-bright-bright = bright). Dewdrops look 晶莹 (jing1 ying2 = crystal-bright).

结晶 (jie2 jing1 = form-crystal) = crystallization. 石英 (shi2 ying1 = stone-flower = quartz) is 晶体 (jing1 ti3 = crystal-body = crystal): 水晶 (shui3 jing2 = water-crystal = pure quartz crystal),

紫晶 (zi3 jing1 = purple-crystal = amethyst). Baby is 愛情結晶品 (ai4 qing2 jie2 jing1 pin3 = love-emotion-form-crystal-product = love’s crystallization).

TVs use 液晶 (yi4 jing1 = liquid-crystal) display. Computers use 晶片 (jing1 pian4 = crystal-flat-piece = chips). Hongkong’s 八達通 (ba1 da2 tong1 = eight-arrive-through = Octopus) is 晶片卡 (jing1 pian4 ka3 = crystal-flat-piece-card = chip card).

by Diana Yue