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

閃 shows 人 (ren2, person) slipping inside 門 (men2, door), hence means flash or quickly evade. 閃電 (shan3 dian4 = flash-electricity) = lightning. Lights 閃耀 (shan3 yao4 = glitter-shine). 靈光一閃 (ling2 guang1 yi1 shan3 = spiritual-light-one-flash) = bright idea flashes across mind.

Pedestrian 閃避 (shan3 bi4 = flash-avoid = darts away from) crashing car. Liar 閃爍其詞 (shan3 shuo4 qi2 ci2 = flicker-scintillate-those-words = speaks evasively). 閃閃縮縮 (shan3 shan3 suo1 suo1 = flash-flash-shrink-shrink) describes coward/thief’s timid/stealthy movements.

金光閃 (jin1 guang1 shan3 shan3 = gold-light-flash-flash) describes blonde hair. Gem-stones 閃光 (shan3 guang1 = flash-brightness = glitter). 閃山雲 (shan3 shan3 yun2 = glitter-hill-cloud = opal) is 半寶石 (ban4 bao3 shi2 = semi-precious-stone).

by Diana Yue