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 photographers

機
Putonghua pronunciation: ji1
Cantonese pronunciation: gei1
Meanings: machine, opportunity, organic, wit

機 (radical 木 mu4, wood) means machine: 機器 (ji1 qi1 = machine-tool = machine), 機件 (ji1 jian4 = machine-parts), 飛機 (fei1 ji1 = flying-machine = air-plane), 機組 (ji1 zu3 = machine/plane-group = plane’s crew).

開機 (kai1 ji1 = open-machine), 關機 (guan1 ji1 = close-machine) means switching machine on/off, esp. 手機 (shou3 ji1 = hand-machine = mobile-phone/cell-phone), 電視機 (dian4 shi4 ji1 = electric-vision-machine = TV). 打機 (da3 ji1 = hit-machine) means playing electronic games. 數碼機 (shu4 ma3 ji1 = numbers-codes-machine = digital camera) is nicknamed 傻瓜機 (sha3 gua1 ji1 = idiot-gourd-camera, i.e. no-tech camera).

機智 (ji1 zhi4 = quick/alert-smart/clever) people may 機關算盡 (ji1 guan1 shuan4 jin4 = machinery-blocks/traps-calculate-exhaust = plot/calculate too meticulously/meanly).

by Diana Yue