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 faith

信

Putonghua pronunciation: xin4
Cantonesse pronunciation: sun3
Meaning: believe, faith, conviction, faithful, reliable, honest, trust, trustworthy, confident


Gentleman 言而有信 (yan2 er2 you3 xin4 = speak-and-has/keeps-faithfulness = gives his word, honours it). Politician stresses his 誠信 (cheng2 xin4 = honesty-trustworthiness). Businessman seeks 可信 (ke3 xin4 = can-believe = reliable) partner with 信任 (xin4 yang4 = trust-use = credibility).


by Diana Yue