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 babies

乳
Putonghua pronunciation: ru3
Cantonese pronunciation: yue5
Meanings: milk, breast, breast-feed

乳 = breast/milk: 牛乳 (niu2 ru3 = cow-milk), 乳酪 (ru3 lao4 = milk-coagulation/paste = cheese), 乳癌 (ru3 ai2 = breast-cancer). 乳房 (ru3 fang2 = milk-room = breast) = vulgar term 奶子 (nai3 zi0 = milk-diminutive = tits).

Woman’s 雙乳 (shuang1 ru3 = two-breasts) have 乳腺 (ru3 xian4 = milk/mammary-glands), 乳頭 (ru3 tou2 = breast-head = nipples), yield 乳汁 (ru3 zhi1 = milk-juice/liquid). 人乳 (ren2 ru3 = human-milk) is nutritious. Moms 哺乳 (bu4 ru3 = feed-milk = breast-feed) or hire 乳母 (ru3 mu3 = milk-mother = nannies). 乳齒 (ru3 ci3 = milk-tooth/teeth) = baby’s milk-tooth/teeth.

乳牛 (ru3 niu2 = milk-cow) means dairy cattle, but 乳豬 (ru3 zhu1 = milk-pig) means suckling pig.

by Diana Yue