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

**粉**

Putonghua pronunciation: fen3
Cantonese pronunciation: fan2
Meanings: powder, pasta

粉 (radical 米 mi3, rice) means powder/pasta: 麵粉 (mian4 fen3 = noodle-powder = flour), 米粉 (mi3 fen3 = rice-flour or rice vermicelli), 粟粉 (su4 fen3 = corn-starch), 糖粉 (tang2 fen3 = sugar-powder/icing), 奶粉 (nai3 fen3 = milk-powder). Mills 磨粉 (mo2 fen3 = grind/churn-out-powder/flour).

雨粉 (yü3 fen3 = rain-powder) = tiny drizzle. 上粉 (shang4 fen3 = up/mount-powder) means powdering surface of dumpling/wall/face. 粉牆 (fen3 qiang2 = powder-wall) = stucco wall.

Babies have 粉嫩 (fen3 nuan1 = powdery-young/tender) skin. Baby-room’s décor uses 粉彩 (fen3 cai3 = powder-colors = pastels): 粉紅 (fen3 hong2 = powdery-red = pink), 粉白 (fen3 bai2 = powdery/milky-white), 粉藍 (fen3 lan2 = powdery-blue = baby-blue), 粉黃 (fen3 huang2 = powdery-yellow = baby-yellow).

by Diana Yue