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 eggs

蛋 Putonghua pronunciation: dan4
Cantonese pronunciation: daan6
Meanings: egg, egg-shaped, O-shaped, oval

Ideogram 蛋 (正 shu1, encircle + 虫 chong2, worm) suggested hens encircling eggs they laid. 蛋 = 卵 (luan3, egg).

雞蛋 (ji1 dan4 = chicken-egg) has 蛋黃 (dan4 huang2 = egg-yellow = egg-yolk), 蛋白 (dan4 bai2 = egg-white). Cook 打蛋 (da3 dan4 = beats-eggs), makes 炒蛋 (chao3 dan4 = stir-fried/scrambled eggs), 蛋糕 (dan4 gao1 = egg-pudding = cakes).

Egg has facetious/insulting meaning: 壞蛋 (huai4 dan4 = bad/rotten-egg = rascal/scoundrel), 笨蛋 (ben4 dan4 = stupid-egg = moron), 傻蛋 (sha2 dan4 = idiot-egg = idiot), 混蛋 (hun4 dan4 = muddled-egg = good-for-nothing). 龜蛋 (gui1 dan4 = tortoise-egg) means bastard. “滾蛋!” (gun3 dan4 = boil-egg) means “Get out!” 零蛋 (ling2 dan4 = zero-egg) = 0 score.

by Diana Yue