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 \ 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 rejuvenation

萌 (meng2)  
Cantonese pronunciation: mang4  
Meaning: bud, sprout, germinate, begin, start

萌 (+=草 cao3, grass) means bud/sprout. In springtime, 草木萌動 (cao3 mu4 meng2 dong4 = grass-wood-sprout-move, i.e. all grasses, herbs, shrubs, trees bear new buds, stir to life). Gardener watches for seedlings' 萌象 (meng2 xiang4 = budding-sign), nurses them when they萌芽 (meng2 ya2 = bud/grow-young-shoot = sprout).

Drug addict 萌生 (meng2 sheng1 = geminate-born = begin = gets) idea of suicide. After rescue and rehabilitation, doctor warns him: Don't let bad habits 故態復萌 (gu4 tai4 fu2 meng2 = old/past-conditions/attitudes-again-geminate = develop again). In tsunami-hit region, economists watch out for 萌兆 (meng2 zhao4 = budding-sign) of economic recovery, rejoice when market again 萌發生機 (meng2 fa1 sheng1 ji1 = germinate-grow/develop-life's-opportunity = springs to life).

by Diana Yue