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

初 Putonghua pronunciation: chu1
Cantonese pronunciation: choh1
Meanings: first, original, early, beginning, new

初 (radical 衣 yī, clothes) means first/beginning/early: 起初 (qi3 chu1 = start-begin = at first), 初步 (chu1 bu4 = first-step = early) plans, 初期 (chu1 qi1 = early-stage) cancer, 初中 (chu1 zhong1 = early-middle = junior high-school).

In 初春 (chu1 chun1 = early-spring) they 初次 (chu1 ci4 = first-time) met. It was her 初戀 (chu1 lian4 = first-love-affair). She gave him her 初夜 (chu1 ye4 = first-night = virginity). 初雪 (chu1 xue3 = first-snow) falls in 初冬 (chu1 dong1 = early-winter).

初生嬰兒 (chu1 sheng1 ying1 er2 = just-born-babies) are sweet. 人之初, 性本善 (ren2 zhi1 chu1, xing4 ben3 shan4 = human-'s-beginning, nature-originally-good/kind) means “All people are born with good nature”.

by Diana Yue