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 drugs and medicines

Putonghua pronunciation: zhen1
Cantonese pronunciation: jam1
Meanings: needle, stitch, shot, pin, prick

針 (radical 金 jin1, gold/metals) means needle/pin/prick. 扎眼 (zhēn1 yǎn3 = needle’s-eye), 針線 (zhēn1 xiàn4 = needle-and-thread), clock’s 時針 (shì2 zhēn1 = hour-hand), 指南針 (zhǐ3 nán2 zhēn1 = point-south-needle = compass).

Middleman 穿針引線 (chuān1 zhēn1 yǐn3 xiàn4 = thread-needle-pull-thread = arranges liaisons). Orator 針對 (zhēn1 duì4 = sharply-opposes/challenges) problem, makes 一針見血 (yī1 zhēn1 jiàn4 xuè3 = one-needle-see-blood = sharp/pertinent) comment. 綿裡藏針 (mián2 lǐ3 cáng2 zhēn1 = cotton-wool-inside-hide-needle) describes soft-looking person hiding sharp/critical attitude.

Nurse 打針 (dá3 zhēn1 = shoot-needle = give medical shots). Wound gets 縫針 (fēng2 zhēn1 = sew-stitches = stitched up), heals with 針刺 (zhēn1 cì4 = sharp-prickly) pain. 針炙 (zhēn1 jiǔ4 = needle-roast) = acupuncture and moxibustion.

by Diana Yue