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:

1\(^{st}\) tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2\(^{nd}\) tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3\(^{rd}\) tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4\(^{th}\) 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 hams**

**肥**

Putonghua pronunciation: fei2
Cantonese pronunciation: fei4
Meanings: fat, corpulent


In Cantonese, fat people are facetiously/rudely called 肥佬 (Cantonese fei4 lo2 = fat-men), 肥婆 (Cantonese fei4 poh4 = fat-women). 肥騰騰 (Cantonese fei4 tang4 tang4 = fat-rise-rise) describes bulging/rippling bellies or fatty/oily meat. Hong Kong colloquialism 肥佬 (fei4 lo2) means fail (from “fail”-transliterated).

Gourmets love 肥叉焼 (fei2 cha1 shao1 = fat-fork-burn/roast = fat barbecued pork), 肥火腿 (fei2 huo3 tui3 = fat-fire-leg = fatty parts of ham).

by Diana Yue