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 drugs and medicines

Putonghua pronunciation: cha2
Cantonese pronunciation: cha4
Meanings: tea

茶 (radical 草 cao3, grass) is 飲料 (yin3 liao4 = drink-material = beverage): 茶樹 (cha2 shu4 = tea-tree/shrub), 茶葉 (cha2 ye4 = tea-leaves), 青茶 (qing1 cha2 = green-tea), 紅茶 (hong2 cha2 = red-tea).

English drink 奶茶 (nai3 cha2 = milk-tea = tea with milk) for 下午茶 (xia4 wu3 cha2 = after~noon-tea). 濃茶 (nong2 cha2 = strong-tea) cleans palate. Sick/worried person 茶飯不思 (cha2 fan4 bu4 si1 = tea-cooked-rice-no-think = has no appetite).

Chinese doctor prepares 苦茶 (ku3 cha2 = bitter-tea = herbal medicine concoction) by slow-boiling 草藥 (cao3 yao4 = herbal-medicine = medicinal herbs). Cantonese habitually drink 涼茶 (liang2 cha2 = Cantonese leung2 cha4 = cool~tea = herbal tea which cools/clears body system).

by Diana Yue