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 making friends

Putonghua pronunciation: cheng2
Cantonese pronunciation: sing4
Meanings: sincere, honest, frank

Character 誠 = 言 (yan2, words) + 成 (cheng2, mature). 誠心誠意 (cheng2 xin1 cheng2 yi4 = sincere-heart-sincere-intention) = sincerely. Businessman makes 有誠意 (you3 cheng2 yi4 = has-honest-intention = bona fide) offer, pledging 誠信 (cheng2 xin4 = honest-believe/bona fide) credibility.

Mother warns daughter: 誠然 (cheng2 ran2 = honest-ly = indeed), 男友 (nan2 you3 = male/man-friend = boyfriend) looks 誠懇 (cheng2 ken3 = sincere-stooping/earnest = sincere), but is he 誠實 (cheng2 shi2 = honest-true = honest)? 忠誠 (zhong1 cheng2 = loyal-sincere = loyal) wife 坦誠 (tan3 cheng2 = openly/frankly-honestly) points out husband’s shortcomings.

Defector 投誠 (tou2 cheng2 = throw/leap-sincere = joins rival camp). 誠心所願 (cheng2 xin1 suo3 yuan4 = truly-heart-’s-wish = amen) ends Christian’s prayer.

by Diana Yue