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

方
Putonghua pronunciation: fang1
Cantonese pronunciation: fong1
Meanings: square, aspect, direction, method, prescription

方 means 方形 (fang1 xing2 = square-shape), 方面 (fang1 mian4 = side-aspect), 方向 (fang1 xiang4 = aspect-direction), 方域 (fang1 yu2 = position-region). 東西方 (dong1 xil fang1 = east-west-regions = East and West) leaders announce 方針 (fang1 zhen1 = direction-point = policies/directives), 方案 (fang1 an4 = directions-plans) for cooperation.

方法 (fang1 fa3 = direction-method) = method. Prisoner 千方百計 (qian1 fang1 bai2 ji4 = thousand-methods-hundred-plots = tries all means) to escape. Bad father 敎子無方 (jiao4 zi3 wu2 fang1 = teach-son-lack-method = cannot teach son manners/decency).

Doctor prescribes 藥方 (yao4 fang1 = medical-formula/prescription about ingredients, dosage, preparation, usage). Terminally-ill patient hopes 古方 (gu3 fang1 = ancient-prescription), 秘方 (mi4 fang1 = secretly-handed-down-prescription) can work miracles.

by Diana Yue