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 old people

敬
Putonghua pronunciation: jing4
Cantonese pronunciation: ging3
Meanings: respect, treat courteously

敬 (radical 亻 pu1, rap/tap) = sentiment/act of 尊敬 (zun1 jing4 = honor-respect), 敬畏 (jing4 wei4 = respect-fear/awe), 敬愛 (jing4 ai4 = respect-love/endearment), 恭敬 (gong1 jing4 = courteous-respectful), 敬酒 (jing4 jiu3 = respectfully-offer wine).

敬語 (jing4 yu3 = respect-word/term) means honorific: “您老” (ning2 lao3 = you-old) is courteous/respectful form of address.

Petty oldies expect 敬老 (jing4 lao3 = respect-for-the-elderly), say youngsters who don't 護座 (rang4 zuo4 = give/yield seat) to elderly are 不敬 (bu4 jing4 = not-respectful = rude).

Actually, youngsters 敬佩 (jing4 pei4 = respect-admire/adores) oldies who are 老當益壯 (lao3 dang1 yi1 zhuang4 = old-should-be-even-more-strong = old yet strong/healthy), 老練 (lao3 lian4 = old-polished/experienced), 老辣 (lao3 la4 = old-spicy-hot = tough).

by Diana Yue