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 scandals

聞
Putonghua pronunciation: wen2
Cantonese pronunciation: man4
Meaning: hear, smell, news, news story, famous

聞 (門 men2, door + 聽 er3, ear) means hear or what is heard/seen/known. 聽聞耳見 (er3 wen2 mu4 jian4 = ear-hear-eye-see) means things seen and heard. 聽 also means verb 嗅 (chou4, smell).

見聞廣博 (jian4 wen2 guang3 bo2 = seen-heard-broad-expansive) describes well-exposed/knowledgeable person. 風聞 (feng1 wen2 = wind-heard) = 傳聞 (chuan2 wen2 = pass-around-heard) = piece of hearsay.

新聞學 (xin1 wen2 xue2 = new/fresh-heard-study = study of news) = journalism. Reporters 跑新聞 (pao3 xin1 wen2 = run-new/fresh-heard = run around gathering/reporting news). Tabloid-readers pass around 八卦新聞 (ba1 gua4 xin1 wen2 = eight-symbols/trigrams-new/fresh-heard = gossip news-stories), especially 闇人 (wen2 ren2 = heard-about-persons = celebrities) 醜聞 (chou3 wen2 = ugly-news = dirty scandals).

by Diana Yue