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 fire

灰
Putonghua pronunciation: hui1
Cantonese pronunciation: fooi1
Meaning: ash, grey, depressed

灰 (radical 火 huo3, fire) means 灰色 (hui1 se1 = ash/grey-color), 灰燼 (hui1 jin4 = ashes-left-from-burning): 煙灰 (yan1 hui1 = cigarette-ashes), 骨灰 (gu3 hui1 = bone-ash = cremated person’s ashes). 灰暗 (hui1 an4 = grey-dim) describes overcast sky or unpromising prospects. 灰熊 (hui1 xiong2 = grey-bear) = grizzly.

灰塵 (hui1 chen2 = ash-dust) = dust. 灰頭灰臉 (hui1 tou2 hui1 lian3 = dusty-head-dusty-face) describes dust/dirt-covered or disgraced/embarrassed person. 面如死灰 (mian4 ru2 si3 hui1 = face-resemble-dead-ashes) describes shocked/grieving person’s pale/ashen face.

Loser 灰心 (hui1 xin1 = ash-heart = feels disappointed/disheartened), 心灰意冷 (xin1 hui1 yi4 leng3 = heart-ash-intention-cold = discouraged/depressed). 死灰復燃 (si3 hui1 fu2 ran2 = dead-ashes-again-burn) describes reviving of extinguished hopes/beliefs/activities.

by Diana Yue