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 obesity

Putonghua pronunciation: fei2
Cantonese pronunciation: fei2
Meanings: fat, rich, enrich


In Cantonese, calling people “肥佬” (fei4 lo2 = fat-man), “肥婆” (fei2 poh4 = fat-woman) is rude/facetious, implying fat/plump people are 難看 (nan2 kan4 = difficult-to-look-at = ugly).

However, fashionable women in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) 以肥為美 (yi3 fei2 wei2 mei3 = use-fat-as-beauty = consider fat/plump as beautiful). 豐乳肥臀 (feng1 ru3 fei2 tuan2 = rich/bulging-breasts-fat/large-bottom) describes a woman/mother’s voluptuous body.

膘肥 (biao1 fei2 = fat/rump-fat) describes meaty/strong horses/cattle. 肥美 (fei2 mei3 = fat-beautiful = fertile/rich) soil does not need 肥料 (fei2 liao4 = fattening-material = fertilizers).

by Diana Yue