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 making friends

知
Putonghua pronunciation: zhī1
Cantonese pronunciation: ji1
Meanings: know, understand

Ideogram 知 (chǐ3, arrow + 口 kōu3, mouth) symbolizes speedily/orally-conveyed information/knowledge. 知道 (zhī1 dao4 = know-the-way) = know. 知识 (zhī1 shī1 = know-identify = knowledge). 無知 (wū2 zhī1 = no-know) = ignorant. 良知 (liáng2 zhī1 = good/kind-know) = conscience.

知心友 (zhī1 xīn1 you3 = know-heart-friend) = bosom pal. 相知甚深 (xiāng1 zhī1 shēn4 shēn1 = mutual-know-quite-deep) describes two/several people sharing deep mutual understanding and friendship.

Grateful for 知遇之恩 (zhī1 yù4 zhī1 ěn1 = know-treat-'s-kindness = understanding/appreciation and kind treatment), 士為知己者死 (shì4 wèi4 zhī1 ji3 zhe2 sǐ3 = man-for-know-self-person-die = man dies for friend/benefactor who understands/appreciates him). 紅顏知己 (hóng2 yán2 zhī1 ji3 = red-visage-know-self) = intimate girlfriend/mistress.

by Diana Yue