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 doors

開 (radical 門 men2 = door)
Putonghua pronunciation: kai1
Cantonese pronunciation: hoi1
Meanings: open, begin, steer

開 means open: 開門 (kai1 men2 = open-door), 開口 (kai1 kou3 = open-mouth = talk). 開始 (kai1 shi3 = open-begin) = begin. 開車 (kai1 che1 = open-car) = start/driver car.

Employee who 開罪 (kai1 zui4 = open-sin/offence = offended) boss gets 開除 (kai1 chu2 = open-eliminate = fired). Seeing slow-witted child 開竅 (kai1 qiao4 = open-holes = grow intelligent), parents 開心 (kai1 xin1 = open-heart = feel happy), say “天開眼!” (tian1 kai1 yan3 = sky/heaven-open-eyes = “Heaven watches, and cares!”)

The Creator 開天闢地 (kai1 tian1 pi4 di4 = open-sky/heaven-clear-land = created heaven and earth). Deng Xiaoping led 改革 開放 (gai3 ge2 kai1 fang4 = change-reform-open-release = reforms and opening up) of China.

by Diana Yue