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 dental care

牙
Putonghua pronunciation: ya2
Cantonese pronunciation: nga4
Meanings: tooth, teeth

牙 = 牙齿 (ya2 chi3 = teeth). Etymologically, 牙 meant convex-surface tooth, 齒 meant concave-surface tooth. 牙床 (ya2 chuang2 = teeth-bed) = 牙齦 (ya2 yin2 = teeth-border) = gums/gingiva.

Baby/toddler develops 乳牙 (ru3 ya2 = milk/primary-teeth), 牙牙學語 (ya2 ya2 xue2 yu3 = “ya-ya”-learn-words = make first speech-sounds). Adults have 門牙 (men2 ya2 = door-teeth = front teeth/incisors), 大牙 (da3 ya2 = big-teeth/molars).

刷牙 (shua1 ya2 = brushing-teeth), 漱口 (sou4 kou3 = rinsing-mouth), using 牙膏 (ya2 gao1 = tooth-paste), 牙线 (ya2 xian4 = tooth-thread = dental floss) improve 口腔衛生 (kou3 qiang1 wei4 sheng1 = mouth-cavity-guard-life = oral hygiene). 咬牙切齒 (yao3 ya2 qie4 chi3 = bite-teeth-cut-teeth) describes angry person’s teeth-grinding/agitated expression.

by Diana Yue