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 \\ 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 cosmetic surgery

脂
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi1
Cantonese pronunciation: ji1
Meaning: fat

脂 (radical 月 = 肉 rou4, flesh/meat) = fat: 松脂 (song1 zhi1 = pine-fat/resin), 油脂 (you2 zhi1 = oily-fat/grease). Tyrants exploit 民脂民膏 (min2 zhi1 min2 gao1 = people’s-fat-people’s-lard = public coffers).

飽和脂肪 (bao3 he2 zhi1 fang2 = saturated-fat-belly-fat = saturated-fats) exceed 不飽和脂肪 (bu4 bao3 he2 zhi1 fang2 = unsaturated-fats) in calorie-content. 脂肪瘤 (zhi1 fang2 liu2 = fatty-lump/tumour) = lipoma.

Model fears 脂肪過多 (zhi1 fang2 guo4 duo1 = fat-belly-fat-pass-much = excessive fat), jogs 燻脂 (shaol zhi1 = burn-away-fat), takes 抽脂 (chou1 zhi1 = suction-assisted-fat-removal = lipoplasty/“lipo”) operation. 腦脂 (yan1 zhi0 = red-fat = rouge) brightens her 羊脂白玉 (yang2 zhi1 bai2 yu4 = lamb’s-fat/lard-white-jade = creamy-white) complexion.

by Diana Yue