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 Hong Kong food

Putonghua pronunciation: dian 3
Cantonese pronunciation: dim 2
Meanings: point, touch, dot, drop, snack, dim-sum

Verb 點 means point/touch: 點名 (dian3 ming2 = point-name = roll-call/nominate), 點頭 (dian3 tou2 = dot-head) = nod/approve.

Noun 點 means drop/wee bit: 雨點 (yu2 dian3 = rain-drops), “有點冷” (you2 dian2 leng3 = has-a-bit-cold) = “It’s a bit cold”. Weak patients 打點滴 (da2 dian3 di1 = hit/mount-dot-drop = get intravenous drip).

點心 (dian3 xin1 = bit-of-heart) = small delicacies/dim-sum. We 上茶樓 (shang4 cha2 lou2 = mount/go-to-tea-house) for 一盅兩件 (yi1 zhong1 liang3 jian4 = one-bowl-two-pieces = bowl of tea, some dim-sum): 蝦餃 (xia1 jiao3 = Cantonese ha1 gaau2 = shrimp-dumplings), 春卷 (chun1 jian4 = Cantonese chun1 guen3 = spring-rolls), 鳳爪 (feng4 zha1o3 = Cantonese fung6 jaau2 = phoenix-claws = stewed chicken feet).

by Diana Yue