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 obesity

**重**
Putonghua pronunciation: zhong4
Cantonese pronunciation: chung4
Meanings: heavy, heaviness, weight

In Chinese, two opposite adjectives forming a noun indicates a quality. Girls care about their bodies' 輕重 (qing1 zhong4 = light-heavy = weight), 肥瘦 (fei2 shou4 = fat-skinny = shape/plumpness/weight).

重量 (zhong4 liang4 = heavy-measure/volume) = weight. Obese people are 過重 (guo4 zhong4 = over-heavy = overweight). Their movements are 笨重 (ben4 zhong4 = clumsy-heavy).

重 also means 重要 (zhong4 yao4 = heavy-important = important). Orators show 凝重 (ning2 zhong4 = concentrated-heavy = serious) expressions, emphasize 重點 (zhong4 dian3 = important-point = focuses), 重視 (zhong4 shi4 = important-see = attach importance to) rhetoric. Reporters cover 重大事件 (zhong4 da4 shi4 jian4 = important-big-event-item = important/significant events), 重要人物 (zhong4 yao4 ren2 wu4 = heavy-necessary-person-object = VIPs).

by Diana Yue