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

減 (jian3)
Cantonese pronunciation: gaam2
Meanings: lessen, reduce

減 = reduce. Recession-hit businesses 減薪 (jian3 xin1 = reduce-salaries), 減少開支 (jian2 shao3 kai1 zhi1 = reduce-less-open-draw = cut expenses). Consequently, people’s purchasing power 減弱 (jian3 ruo4 = reduce-weak = weakens).

Environmentalists advocate 減排 (jian3 pai2, short for 減少排放 廢氣 = jian2 shao3 pai2 fang4 fei4 qi4 = reduce-less-release-free-trash-gases = reducing waste gas emission).

Obese people 減肥 (jian3 fei2 = reduce-fat = reduce weight), 節食 (jie2 shi2 = reduce-eating = diet), 戒糖 (jie4 tang2 = avoid sugar). They hate to hear “你發福了! (ni3 fa1 fu2 le0 = you-develop-fortune-ed = you look fatter/broader!”, welcome compliment “你清減了!” (ni3 qing1 jian3 le0 = you-cleansed-reduced-ed = “You look thinner/slimmer!”

by Diana Yue