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 eyes

看 Putonghua pronunciation: kan4
Cantonese pronunciation: hon1
Meaning: see, look, watch

看 (radical 目 mu4, eye) means 看到 (kan4 dao4 = see-reach = see). Blind man 看不見 (kan4 bu4 jian4 = look-no-see = can’t see). Poet 看海 (kan4 hai3 = looks/stares-at-the-sea). Dog 看門 (kan4 men2 = watches/guards-door/entrance).

Scholar 看書 (kan4 shu1 = look-book = reads), develops 看法 (kan4 fa3 = look-method = opinions/views). 看病 (kan4 bing4 = see-illness) describes doctor examining/treating patient or friend visiting patient. 看護 (kan4 hu4 = watch-protect) = nurse.

Boy 看上 (kan4 shang4 = has-eyes-on) 好看 (hao3 kan4 = good/pretty-looking) girl. 向前看 (xiang4 qian2 kan4 = towards-frontlook) = look ahead. Principled person 看不起 (kan4 bu4 qi3 = look-no-up = belittles/despises) 向錢看 (xiang4 qian2 kan4 = towards-money-look/aim = mercenary) people/attitude.

by Diana Yue