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 hope

失
Putonghua pronunciation: shi1
Cantonese pronunciation: sat1
Meaning: lose, err, neglect, fail, lost

失 means 失去 (shi1 qü4 = lose/lost-gone), 過失 (guo4 shi1 = mistake-loss = mistake/fault): 失明 (shi1 ming2 = lose-brightness = go blind), 失手 (shi1 shou3 = err-hand = flop attempt), 失業 (shi1 ye4 = lose-profession = unemployed). 失言 (shi1 yan2 = lose/err-words = carelessly making inappropriate/offensive remark) is 失禮 (shi1 li3 = lose-rituals/manners = rude).

Lad who 失戀 (shi1 lian4 = lose-love = gets dumped by lover) 失魂落魄 (shi1 hun2 luo4 po4 = lose-soul-drop-spirit = loses heart/appetite for everything). Woman 失足 (shi1 zu1 = lose-foothold = falla/sina): 失身 (shi1 shen1 = loses-body/chastity) to seducer.

Businessman who 失信 (shi1 xin4 = lose-fidelity/trust = doesn’t keep promise) makes partner 失望 (shi1 wang4 = lose-hope = disappointed).