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 the face

眼 (radical 目 mu4 = eye)
Putonghua pronunciation: yan3
Cantonese pronunciation: ngaan5
Meanings: eye

We use 眼睛 (yan3 jing1, eye-pupil = eyes) to 觀看 (guan1 kan4 = watch-see = see) things. 瞎 (xia1) = 盲 (mang2) = blind. 色盲 (sei1 mang2 = color-blind) people have poor 視力 (shi4 li4 = see-strength = eyesight). 近視 (jin4 shi4 = near-eyesight = near-sighted/myopic) people wear 眼鏡 (yan3 jing4 = eye~ mirror = eye-glasses). 失明 (shi1 ming2 = lost-brightness/eyesight = blind) people use 盲字 (mang2 zi4 = blind-words = braille).

Poetically-speaking, eyes are 靈魂之窗 (ling2 hun2 zhi1 chuang1 = soul-spirit-‘s’-window, vivifying/animating person’s face/expression).

Husband-picking/art-collecting requires 眼光 (yan3 guang1 = eye-light = taste/judgment). 瞎了眼 (xia2 le0 yan3 = blind-ed-eye = 有眼無珠 you2 yan3 wu2 zhu1 = has-eye-no-pupil) describes people making friends/choices blindly/irrationally.

by Diana Yue