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 winter clothes

Putonghua pronunciation: hou4
Cantonese pronunciation: hau5
Meanings: thick, solid

厚 means thick: 厚皮 (hou4 pi2 = thick-skin), 厚牆 (hou4 qiang2 = thick-walls). Soldier wears 加厚 (jia1 hou4 = add-thick = extra-thick) bullet-proof vest. 厚厚的書 (hou4 hou4 de4 shu1 = thick-thick-’s-book) = “a book so thick”.

厚 also means solid/generous: 深厚 (shen1 hou4 = deep-solid) friendship/scholarship, 厚禮 (hou4 li3 = generous/costly-gifts). Pharoahs were 厚葬 (hou4 zang4 = thick-inter = lavishly entombed). Protégée wins patron’s 厚愛 (hou4 ai4 = thick-love = loving kindness), 厚待 (hou4 dai4 = thick-treatment = generous treatment/endowment).

厚’s opposite is 薄 (bo2, thin/mean). 厚此薄彼 (hou4 ci3 bo2 bi3 = generous-to-this-mean-to-that) is biased attitude. 厚重 (hou4 zhong4 = thick-heavy) winter clothes give way to summer’s 薄衫 (bo2 shan1 = thin-blouses).

by Diana Yue