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 dental care

Putonghua pronunciation: bu3
Cantonese pronunciation: bo2
Meanings: mend, refill, supplement

補 (radical 衣 = 衣 yī1, clothes) means mend/supplement: 補衣 (bu3 yi1 = mends-clothes), 補鞋 (bu3 xie2 = mends/repairs-shoes), 補襪子 (bu3 wa1 zi0 = mend-socks-diminutive).

Housewife works to 幫補家計 (bang1 bu3 jia1 ji4 = help-supplement-home-plan = earn more to pay for home expenses), awaits husband’s 補薪 (bu3 xin1 = replenish-salary = back-pay).

Booster-drinks 補充 (bu3 chong1 = refill-fill = replenish) energy. Small business seeks 補助 (bu3 zhu4 = supplement-help = grant/aid). Bank 補償 (bu3 chang2 = mend-repay = makes amends to) mishandled clients. 取長補短 (qū3 chang2 bu3 duan3 = take-long-supplement-short) means learning from others’ strengths to improve one’s own shortcomings.

Dentist examines bad teeth, advises 補牙 (bu3 ya2 = mend-teeth = putting in fillings).

by Diana Yue