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

光 Putonghua pronunciation: guang1
Cantonese pronunciation: gwong1
Meaning: light, brightness, radiance, glory, empty, bare

光 (huo3 + 亅 kneeling person) suggests lamp/torch/light held by person. 光線 (guang1 xian4 = light-rays) makes room 光亮 (guang1 liang4 = brightly-lit-up). Plants need 陽光 (yang2 guang1 = sun-light). 月光 (yue4 guang1 qu3 = moon-light-song) = Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

Hero wins 光榮 (guang1 rong2 = light-flourishing = glory/honour). VIP 光臨 (guang1 lin2 = honour-arrive = honours/graces party by coming).

Ignorant person 鼠目寸光 (shu3 mu4 cun4 guang1 = rat’s-eyes-inch-light = has little/no vision). Young entrepreneur 目光遠大 (mu4 guang1 yuan3 da4 = eye-light/sight-far-big = is far-sighted), 有眼光 (you3 yan3 guang1 = has-eye-light = has good observation/judgment), 前途光明 (qian2 tu2 guang1 ming2 = ahead-path-light-bright = will have a bright future).

by Diana Yue