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

Putonghua pronunciation: er3
Cantonese pronunciation: yi5
Meanings: ear

We use 耳朵 (er3 duo1 = ear-piece = ears) to 聆聽 (ling2 ting4 = listen-hear). 聾 (radical 耳, long2 = deaf) people need 助聽器 (zhu4 ting4 qi4 = help-hear-instrument = listening aids). 耳垢 (er3 gou4 = ear-dirt) = ear-wax. Music is 悅耳 (yue4 er2 = pleasing-to-the-ear) or 刺耳 (ci4 er2 = pierce-ear = ear-jarring).

打耳光 (da2 er3 guang1 = hit-ear-light) = slap-on-the-face. 吃耳光 (chi1 er3 guang1 = eat-slap = getting slapped) is embarrassing.

Gang-leaders have 耳目 (er3 mu4 = ears-eyes = informants). Foolish rule-breaker 掩耳盜鈴 (yan2 er3 dao4 ling2 = cover-ears-steal-bell = believes his obvious theft/act is unnoticed), dismisses advice like 耳邊風 (er3 bian1 feng1 = ear-side-wind = the passing wind).

by Diana Yue