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

植
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi2
Cantonese pronunciation: jik6
Meanings: plant, grow, cultivate, transplant

植 (木 mu4, wood/tree + 直 zhi2, straight/vertical) means planting/establishing something upright. 植物 (zhi2 wu4 = plant-thing) = plants. Farmers 植樹 (zhi2 shu4 = plant-trees), 種植 (zhong4 zhi2 = sow-seeds-plant = plant/cultivate) crops, 培植 (pei2 zhi2 = cultivate-plant = nurture) seedlings.

Geographer studies region’s 植被 (zhi2 bei4 = plant-cover = vegetation). Native culture 植根本土 (zhi2 gen1 ben3 tu3 = plant-roots-own-land = has indigenous roots). 深耕密植 (shen1 geng1 mi4 zhi2 = deep-plough-close-plant) describes intensive farming or pioneer/administrator’s attentive/deep-reaching cultivation of plan/talents.

Doctors 移植 (yi2 zhi2 = move-plant = transplant) foreign tissues/organs. Cosmetic surgeons 植皮 (zhi2 pi2 = transplant-skin = do skin grafting) for burnt wounds. Dentists 植牙 (zhi2 ya2 = plant-tooth = do teeth implants).

by Diana Yue