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

泪
Putonghua pronunciation: lei4
Cantonese pronunciation: lui6
Meaning: tear, tear-drop

泪 (radical 水 = water shui3, water) = 眼泪 (yan3 lei4 = eyes'-tears):
落泪 (luo4 lei4 = drop-tears) = 流泪 (liu2 lei4 = flow-tears = cry/weep), 淚珠 (lei4 zhu1 = tear-pearl/bead = tear-drops), 抹泪 (mao4 lei4 = wipe-tears), 燦泪 (zhu1 lei4 = candle-tears) = molten wax dripping from burning candle.

泪腺 (lei4 xian4 = tear-glands) produce 淚水 (lei4 shui3 = tear-water = tears). 淚如雨下 (lei4 ru2 yu3 xia4 = tear-resemble-rain-down) = flooded with tears.

Prostitute 背人垂泪 (bei4 ren2 chui2 lei4 = back-towards-people-drop-tears = weeps behind others’ backs). Friend sheds 同情之泪 (tong2 qing2 zhi1 lei4 = same-feeling-'s-tears = tears of compassion). Hypocrite sheds 鲤鱼泪 (er4 yu2 lei4 = crocodile tears).

by Diana Yue