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

口

Putonghua pronunciation: kou3
Cantonese pronunciation: hau2
Meanings: mouth, opening

We use 口 (口 = 嘴巴 zui3 ba1 = mouth-opening = mouth) to 吃 (chi1 = eat), 說話 (shuo1 hua4 = say-words = speak/talk). 哑巴 (ya3 ba1 = mute-opening/mouth = mute people) use 手語 (shou2 yu3 = hand-language = sign language). 口吃 (kou3 chi4 = mouth-eat) = stutter/stammer. 口臭 (kou3 chou4 = mouth-stink) means bad breath.

Oldsters tell 口述歷史 (kou3 shuo4 li4 shi3 = mouth-narrate-experience-history = oral history). Protestors yell 口號 (kou3 hao4 = mouth-order = slogans). 口頭協議 (kou3 tou2 xie2 yi3 = mouth-head/on-together-agree = oral/verbal agreements) precede written contracts.

一家四口 (yi1 jia1 si4 kou3 = one-family-four-months = family of four) earning $5,000/month can hardly 糊口 (hu2 kou3 = paste-mouth = fill mouths/stomachs).

by Diana Yue