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 love

愛
Putonghua pronunciation: ai4
Cantonese pronunciation: oi3
Meaning: love, fondness, endearment, care, attachment

愛 (radical 心 xin1, heart) means 喜愛 (xi3 ai4 = like-love): 愛好 (ai4 hao4 = love-fondness/hobby), 愛吃 (ai4 chi1 = like-to-eat/savour-food), 愛國 (ai4 guo2 = love-country/nation = patriotic), 愛心 (ai4 xin1 = loving-heart/kindness).

Parents 疼愛 (teng2 ai4 = pain/endear-love = dotes on) daughter, also love son-in-law because 愛屋及烏 (ai4 wu1 ji2 wu1 = love-house-extend-to-crow = love beloved’s beloved). 愛情 (ai4 qing2 = love-feeling) means romantic love. Valentine card says “我愛你” (wo3 ai4 ni3 = “I-love-you”). 愛人 (ai4 ren2 = love-person) means lover or, in Mainland, spouse.

Religions preach 大愛 (da4 ai4 = big/great-love = selfless/universal love). 愛人如己 (ai4 ren2 ru2 ji3 = love-people-resemble-self) = “Love thy neighbor as thyself”.

by Diana Yue