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 fever

炎 (yan2)
Cantonese pronunciation: yim4
Meaning: hot, blazing, burning, fever, feverish, inflammation

炎 (two 火 huo3, fire, suggesting rising flames) describes 炎热 (yan2 ri4 = blazing/very-hot) weather/climate: 炎夏 (yan2 xia4 = hot-summer), 夏日炎炎 (xia4 ri4 yan2 yan2 = summer-days-burn-burn = “Summer days are so hot!” 炎黄子孙 (Yan2 Huang2 zi3 sun1 = Yan-Emperor’s-Huang-Emperor’s-sons-grandsons) means all Chinese people.

Lackeys 趋炎附勢 (cui1 yan2 fu4 shi4 = go-to-hot-attach-to-force = flock to please those in power). Bankrupt person feels 世態炎凉 (shi4 tai4 yan2 liang2 = world’s-attitudes-hot-cold = people once nice/warm to me have turned cold = it’s a snobbish world).

Wounds can 發炎 (fa1 yan2 = develop-hot = get inflamed).

Doctor treats 炎症 (yan2 zheng4 = hot-disease = inflammation) with 消炎藥 (xiao1 yan2 yao4 = anti-inflammatory drugs).

by Diana Yue