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

鼻
Putonghua pronunciation: bi2
Cantonese pronunciation: bei6
Meanings: nose

We use 鼻 (= 鼻子 bi2 zi0 = nose-diminutive = nose) to 呼吸 (hu1 xi1 = exhale-inhale = breathe), 嗅 (xiu4 = smell). 打鼻鼾 (da3 bi2 han1 = hit-nose-snore) = snoring, 挖鼻孔 (wa1 bi2 kong3 = dig-nose-hole) = picking nose/nostril.

Catching 傷風 (shang1 feng1 = hurt-wind = cold) causes 鼻塞 (bi2 sai1 = nose/nasal-congestion), 流鼻涕 (liu2 bi2 ti4 = flow-nose-fluid = runny nose). 酒糟鼻 (jiu3 zao1 bi2 = wine/liquor-dregs-nose) means red lobulated nose.

Snobs 鼻孔朝天 (bi2 kong33 chao2 tian1 = nose-holes-towards-sky = turn nose up at others). Weak dependents 仰人鼻息 (yang3 ren2 bi2 xi1 = look-up-to-someone’s-nose-breath). 塌鼻 (ta1 bi2 = collapse/flat-nosed) Asians envy 高鼻 (gao1 bi2 = tall-nosed) Caucasians.