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 counting your blessings

恩 Putonghua pronunciation: en1
Cantonese pronunciation: yan1
Meaning: kindness, favor, bestowment, blessing, grace, love, charity

恩 (radical 心 xin1, heart) means kindness/bestowment: donor’s 恩惠 (en4 hui4 = kindness-favor), master’s 恩赐 (en1 ci4 = kind-gift), Guanyin’s 恩慈 (en1 ci2 = grace-and-mercy). 感恩节 (gan3 en1 jie2 = appreciate/thank-blessing-festival) = Thanksgiving Day.

恩愛 (en1 ai4 = favor-love) describes mutually loving/caring couple. 忘恩負義 (wang4 en1 fu4 yi4 = forget-kind-betray-righteous) describes traitor. To slaves, liberator is 恩重如山 (en1 zhong4 ru2 shan1 = kindness-heavy-resemble-mountain = person to whom they owe everything).

Orphan appreciates foster parents’ 養育之恩 (yang3 yu4 zhi1 en1 = breed-raise-'s-kindness = kindness in raising him). 恩人 (en1 ren2 = favor-person = benefactor) says: 施恩莫望報 (shi1 en1 mo4 wang4 bao4 = give-favor-don't-hope-return = Don't expect returns for charity given).

by Diana Yue