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

深
Putonghua pronunciation: shen1
Cantonese pronunciation: sam1
Meaning: deep, profound, dark

深 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) means deep/dark: 深海 (shen1 hai3 = deep-sea), 深色 (shen1 se1 = dark-color), 深山 (shen1 shan1 = deep-mountains), 深夜 (shen1 ye4 = deep/late-night).

Diver enters 深水 (shen1 shui3 = deep-water region), estimates 深浅 (shen1 qian3 = deep-shallow = depth).

Parents 深愛 (shen1 ai4 = deeply-love) son/daughter. Lover 情深似海 (qing2 shen1 si4 hai3 = amour-deep-resemble-sea = deeply/dearly loves his sweetheart).

深入 (shen1 ru4 tan4 tao3 = deep-enter-probe-seek = study in-depth) ancient Persia’s 深厚文化 (shen1 hou4 wen2 hua4 = deep-thick-writing-transformation = rich civilization/cultural tradition).

by Diana Yue