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 age

Putonghua pronunciation: zhang3
Cantonese pronunciation: jeung2
Meaning: old, elder, senior, grow, expand

Verb 長 means 生長 (sheng1 zhang3 = born-grow = grow).
Plants 長葉 (zhang3 ye4 = grow-leaves). Teenagers 長肉 (zhang3 rou4 = grow-flesh = put on flesh/muscles). Economy 大幅增長 (da4 fu1 zhang1 zhang3 = big-sheet/degree-increase-grow = grows spectacularly).

Adjective/noun 長 means elder/senior: 年長 (nian2 zhang3 = years-old = senior/elderly), 長輩 (zhang3 bei = older/senior-generation), 長子 (zhang3 zi3 = eldest-son), 長官 (zhang3 guan1 = senior-officer), 船長 (chuan2 zhang3 = ship's-captain).

家長 (jia1 zhang3 = family-senior = parents) watch kids 長大 (zhang3 da4 = grow-big = grow up), 長高 (zhang3 gao1 = grow-tall), hope they 長腦子 (zhang3 nao3 zio = grow-brains-diminutive = learn to think), 有長進 (you3 zhang3 jin4 = have-growth-progress = achieve things).

by Diana Yue