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 presidential elections

Putonghua pronunciation: xiang4
Cantonese pronunciation: jeung6
Meanings: elephant

Pictogram 象 = 大象 (da4 xiang4 = big-elephant), fondly called 大笨象 (da4 ben4 xiang4 = big-clumsy/stupid-elephant). 長毛象 (chang2 mao2 xiang4 = long-haired-elephant) = mammoth. 象拔 (xiang4 ba2 = elephant-pull) = elephant’s nose.

象牙 (xiang4 ya2 = elephant-teeth/tusks) = ivory. Dreamer lives in 象牙塔 (xiang4 ya2 ta3 = ivory-pagoda = ivory tower).

Chinese idiom 象以齒焚身 (xiang4 yi3 chi3 fen2 shen1 = elephant-because-of-tusks-burnt-body) means possessing valuable assets/talents may cause possessor’s doom.

象 is mascot of 共和黨 (Gong4 He2 Dang3 = commmunal-harmony-party = the Republican Party) which lost presidential election. Voters 瞎子摸象 (xia1 zi0 mo1 xiang4 = blind-person-touch/feel-elephant, i.e. try to figure out what an elephant (the big picture) looks like but cannot.

by Diana Yue