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 passive waiting

懒 懒
Cantonese pronunciation: laan5
Meanings: lazy, negligent, languid, listless, passive, sluggish

懒 = 心 xin1, heart + 责 (lai4, laze): 懒惰 (lan3 duo4 = lazy-inert/slothful), 懒人 (lan3 ren2 = lazy-person), 懒散 (lan3 san3 = lazy-disorganized/undisciplined). 躲懒 (duo3 lan3 = hide-lazy) = sneak away from work/duties.

Feeling 懒洋洋 (lan3 yang2 yang2 = lazy-overflow-overflow = languid), we 伸懒腰 (shen1 lan3 yao1 = stretch-lazy-waist = stretch), 打呵欠 (da3 he1 qian4 = make-“he-qian”-sound = yawn). 懒虫 (lan3 chong2 = lazy-worm/bug), 懒鬼 (lan3 gui3 = lazy-ghost) mean “Lazybone!”

懒得去 (lan3 de2 qü4 = lazy-get-go-to) = too lazy/tired/indisposed to do something; 懒得去管 (lan3 de2 qü4 guan3 = wouldn’t bother to interfere), 懒得去想 (lan3 de2 qü4 xiang3 = wouldn’t even bother to think about it).

by Diana Yue