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 mass shootings

Putonghua pronunciation: dao3, dao4
Cantonese pronunciation: do, do3
Meanings: fall, tumble, topple, pour, reverse, inverted

倒 (dao4) means reversed/up-side-down: 倒運 (dao4 yün4 = reversed-fortune = ill-luck/unlucky), 除夕倒數 (chu2 xi1 dao4 shu3 = change-night-reverse-count = New Year's Eve count-down).

倒 (dao3) means fall/drop/down: 倒下 (dao3 xia4 = fall-down), 跌倒 (die1 dao3 = trip/fall-down). Waitress 倒茶 (dao3 cha2 = down-tea = pours tea). Drunks 醉倒 (zui4 dao3 = get-drunk-collapse), 東歪西倒 (dong1 wai1 xi1 dao3 = east-bend-west-drop = fall over in all directions).

Soldiers open fire, victims 應聲倒地 (ying4 sheng1 dao3 di4 = echo-sound-fall-ground = as guns sound, drop to the ground). Rebels cry: “打倒 (da3 dao3 = beat-down = Down with) dictator!” 兵敗如山倒 (bing1 bai4 ru2 shan1 dao3 = armies- defeated- resemble-mountains-fall) = big defeat with domino effect.

by Diana Yue