The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zì (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zì 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 zì together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zì 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 zì 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 cancers

癌

Putonghua pronunciation: ai2
Cantonese pronunciation: ngaam4
Meanings: cancer

Ideogram 癌 (radical 广 chuang2, illness + 岩 yan2, cliff, indicating an illness with a lump/patch/growth) was originally pronounced yan2 (following pronunciation of 岩 yan2). To avoid confusion with homophone 炎 (yan2, infection), e.g. 肺炎 (fei4 yan2 = lungs-infection = pneumonia), 肝炎 (gan1 yan2 = liver-infection = hepatitis), 癌’s pronunciation is changed to ai2, e.g. 肺癌 (fei4 ai2 = lung-cancer), 肝癌 (gan1 ai2 = liver-cancer).

癌細胞 (ai2 xi4 bao1 = cancer-small-cells = cancer cells) spread, enter 淋巴系統 (lin2 ba1 xi4 tong3 = “lymph”-transliterated-link-control = lymphatic system), 入侵 (ri4 qin1 = enter-invade) other organs.


by Diana Yue