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 accidents

Putonghua pronunciation: yan 4
Cantonese pronunciation: yim 6
Meanings: urgent, check, examine

In 實驗室 (shi2 yan4 shi4 = solid/practice-check/examine-room = laboratories) lab technicians 做實驗 (zuo4 shi2 yan4 = do/work solid/practice-check/examine = do experiments).

Accident victim’s 傷勢 (shang1 shi4 = injury-condition) needs 檢驗 (jian3 yan4 = pick-up-examine = examination): 體檢 (ti2 jian3 = body-check-up), 驗血 (yan4 xue4 = check-blood = blood tests), 驗眼 (yan4 yan3 = check-eyes), 驗腦 (yan4 nao3 = check-brain = brain-check).

X光 (= 艾克斯射線 = ai4 ke1 si1 she4 xian4 = “X”-transliterated-radiate-ray = X-ray) examination shows 骨折 (gu3 zhe2 = bone-break = bone fracture) in injured limbs. Surgeons perform 切除 (qie1 chu2 = cut-remove = amputation) or 斷肢再植 (duan4 zhi1 zai4 zhi2 = broken/severed-limb-again/re-plant = replantation of severed limb).

by Diana Yue