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 water

Putonghua pronunciation: di1
Cantonese pronunciation: dik1
Meanings: drip, drop, droplet

滴 means drop/droplet or dripping:滴泪 (di1 lei4 = drop/shed-tears), 淚滴 (lei4 di1 = tear-drop). 滴水不漏 (di1 shui3 bu4 lou4 = drop-of-water-no-spill) describes tightly-sealed contained/secrets. 滴血 (di1 xue3 = drop-of-blood) also describes blood-dripping wound or painfully-grieving heart.

滴’s pronunciation resembles liquid 滴下 (di1 xia4 = dripping-down): Rain’s 滴滴瀝瀝 (di1 di0 li1 li0 = pitter-patter), clock’s 滴滴答答 (di1 di0 da1 da0 = tick-tock). Ancient Chinese used 铜壶滴漏 (tong2 hu2 di1 lou4 = bronze-flask-drip-spill = bronze clepsydra, water-clock) for measuring minutes/hours.

Children recall 點滴 (dian3 di1 = point-drop = this and that, tit-bits) from deceased parents’ lives. Operated patient 打點滴 (da3 dian3 di1 = hit/take-point-drip = is put on the drip).

by Diana Yue