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

意
Putonghua pronunciation: yi4
Cantonese pronunciation: yi3
Meaning: idea, feeling, sense, meaning, urge, intention, determination

意 (心 xin1, heart/mind + 音 yin1, sound, i.e. from the heart/mind) means 意念 (yi4 nian4 = notion/thought), 意識 (yi4 shi1 = awareness/consciousness), 睡意 (shui4 yi4 = sleep-sense) = drowsiness, 便意 (bian4 yi4 = convenience-urge) = urge to stool. Philanthropist 慈意 (le4 yi4 = happy-feeling = happily/willingly) give donations.

Philosopher explains treatise's 意思 (yi4 si1 = meaning-ideas), asks for students' 意見 (yi4 jian4 = ideas-observation/opinions) on life's 意義 (yi4 yi4 = meaning-significance). Suitor whose 愛意 (ai4 yi4 = love/romancec-intention = love) is rejected develops 惡意 (er4 yi4 = evil/malignant-thoughts), 殺意 (sha1 yi4 = killing/murder-intent).

Driver 隨意 (sui2 yi4 = follow-thought = randomly) crosses lanes, causes 意外 (yi4 wai4 = intention-outside/beyond = unintended/unpredictable happening = accident).

by Diana Yue