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 body-checks

Putonghua pronunciation: duan4
Cantonese pronunciation: duen6
Meaning: split, break, cut, separate, determine, judge, decide

斷 (radical 斤 jin1, catty) means split/cut/sever: 斬斷 (kan3 duan4 = chop-sever), 斷開 (duan4 kai1 = break-apart). Toddlers 斷乳 (duan4 ru3 = stop-milk = are weaned from breastfeeding). 斷肢再植 (duan4 zhi1 zai4 zhi2 = severed-limb-again-planted) = limb transplant.

Mobs 不斷 (bu4 duan4 = non-stop) riot, 斷絕 (duan4 jue2 = cut-off—completely) city’s supplies. 優遊寡斷 (you1 you2 gua3 duan4 = comfortably—leisurely—lacking decisiveness = indecisive) ruler wrongly 判斷 (pan4 duan4 = assessed—judged) situation, went to 斷頭台 (duan4 tou2 tai2 = sever—head—stage = guillotine).

Doctor 斷症 (duan4 zheng4 = judge—illness = makes diagnosis), 斷定 (duan4 ding4 = judges—determines) patient has tumor, 斷言 (duan4 yan2 = firmly—says/declares) it’s malignant. Patient 果斷 (guo3 duan4 = bravely/firmly—decisively) accepts operation.

by Diana Yue