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 talents

Putonghua pronunciation: nao 3
Cantonese pronunciation: no 5
Meanings: brain, mind

大腦 (da nao 43 = big-brain = cerebrum) controls our motoring/mental functions, hence 主腦 (zhu nao 23 = master-brain) means principal-planner/mastermind. 腦溢血 (não yi xue 343 = brain-spill/overflow-blood) = brain haemorrhage.

Memories stay in our 腦海 (não hai 23 = brain-sea = mind). When 傷腦筋 (shang nao jin 131 = hurt-brain-tendon = brain-wracking) situations arise, we 絞盡腦汁 (jiao jin nao zhi 3431 = wring-out-exhaust-brain-juice = think hard) for solutions.


by Diana Yue