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 Ebola

窮
Putonghua pronunciation: qiong2
Cantonese pronunciation: kung4
Meaning: lack, exhaust, needy, impoverished, poor, poverty

窮 (showing 身 shen1, body 弓 gong1, bent under 穴 xue2, cave) means exhaustive/helpless/impoverished. Police 窮追 (qiong2 zuil = persistently-chase) thief into 窮巷 (qiong2 xiang4 = dead-end-alley = cul-de-sac). 窮光蛋 (qiong2 guang1 dan4 = impoverished-bare-egg) = penniless guy.

窮人 (qiong2 ren2 = poor-people) live below 貧窮線 (pin2 qiong2 xian2 = needy-poor-line = poverty line), 喊窮 (han3 qiong2 = yell-poor = declare/complain they are poor), feel 人窮 志短 (ren2 qiong2 zhi4 duan3 = person-poor-courage-short = broke and demoralized).

In Ebola-stricken 窮國 (qiong2 guo2 = poor-countries), governments 技窮 (ji4 qiong2 = skills-exhaust = cannot do more). But scientist 窮一生之力 (qiong2 yi1 sheng1 zhi1 li4 = exhaust-one-life-'s-efforts = spends whole life) developing anti-Ebola drugs.

by Diana Yue