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 anesthesia

nen

Putonghua pronunciation: ma2
Cantonese pronunciation: ma1
Meaning: fiber crops, hemp, flax, jute, numerous, confused, chaotic, numbness, paralysis


密密麻麻 (mi4 mi4 ma2 ma2 = packed-packed-hemp-hemp = densely-packed) engagements make us feel 心乱如麻 (xin1 luan4 ru2 ma2 = heart-confused-resemble-hemp = confused/restless), 麻煩 (ma2 fan2 = hemp-frustrate = troubled/worried), 麻痹 (ma2 bi4 = numb-insensitive/unfeeling), 麻目不仁 (ma2 mu4 bu4 ren2 = numb-wooden/hardened-not-kind = apathetic).

麻醉師 (ma2 zui4 shi1 = numb-intoxicate-master = anesthesiologist) uses 麻醉藥 (ma2 zui4 yao4 = anesthetic/narcotic drug) for 全身 (qüan2 shen1 = entire-body = general) anesthesia, 局部 (jü2 bu4 = unit-part = local) anesthesia.

by Diana Yue