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

染
Putonghua pronunciation: ran3
Cantonese pronunciation: yim5
Meaning: stain, dye, catch

染 (radical 丶 = 水 shui3, water) means dye/stain/pollute: 染色 (ran3 se1 = stain/dye-with-colorant), 染布 (ran3 bu4 = dye-cloth), 染料 (ran3 liao4 = dye-stuffs/agents). 一塵不染 (yi1 chen2 bu4 ran3 = one-dust-not-stained) describes spotlessly-clean surface.

染病 (ran3 bing4 = stain-ill) = contract illness. 染毒瘾 (ran3 du2 yin3 = stain-poison-addiction) = addicted to dangerous drugs. Drinking 污染 (wu1 ran3 = dirty-polluted/contaminated) water makes people 染上 (ran3 shang4 = stain-upon = catch) 傳染病 (chuan2 ran3 bing4 = pass-on-stain-disease = transmissible/infectious diseases).

Medics touching 受感 (shou4 gan3 ran3 = are-affected-stained = infected) patients may 染上 (ran3 shang4 = stain-upon = catch) 埃博拉病毒 (ai1 bo2 la1 bing4 du2 = "Ebola"-transliterated-disease-poison = Ebola virus),

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