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 disabled people

聋 (long2)
Cantonese pronunciation: lung4
Meanings: deaf

殘 (can2) means withered/incomplete/disabled: 殘花 (can2 hua1 = withered flower), 殘月 (can2 yue4 = waning-moon), 殘廢 (can2 fei4 = mangled/maimed-invalidated = disabled), 自殘 (zi4 can2 = self-maim = disfigure/maim oneself).

耳科 (er2 ke1 = ear-subject = otology) doctor examines patient 聾耳膜 (er3 mo2 = ear-membrane = ear-drum), installs 助聽器 (zhu4 ting4 qi4 = assist-hearing-machine = hearing aid). 聾子 (long2 zi0 = deaf-son = 聾人 long2 ren2 = deaf-person) has damaged 聽覺 (ting1 jue2 = hearing/listening-sense = sense of hearing), 聽不見 (ting1 bu4 jian4 = hear-not-see = cannot hear).

震耳欲聾 (zhen1 er2 yu4 long2 = shake-ear-would-deaf) describes deafening sounds. 裝聾扮啞 (zhuang1 long2 ban4 ya3 = pretend-deaf-make-up-mute) means pretending not to hear/know.

by Diana Yue