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

脱 (radical 月 = 肉 rou4, flesh/meat) = remove: 脱髮 (tuo1 fa3 = lose-hair), 脫毛 (tuo1 mao2 = remove-body-hair), 脫皮 (tuo1 pi2 = peeling-of-skin). 脫水 (tuo1 shui3 = remove/lose-water) = dehydrated.

Strip-teaser 脫衣 (tuo1 yi1 = takes-off-clothes), 脫光 (tuo1 guang1 = strips-herself-bare). Apartment 脫手 (tuo1 shou3 = leave-hands = is sold), owner cashes out. Spy 脫身 (tuo1 shen1 = disengage-body = escapes/slips away), 脫離 (tuo1 li2 = disengage-leave = drops) enemy’s surveillance.

Healed patients 脫險 (tuo1 xian3 = escape-danger). Disease-stricken country successfully 脫貧 (tuo1 pin2 = quit-poverty = overcomes state of poverty), 擺脫 (bai3 tuo1 = swing-free = drops) tear-jerking image, 脫胎換骨 (tuo1 tai huan4 gu3 = leave-embryo-change-bones = is completely reborn).

by Diana Yue