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

Putonghua pronunciation: ya3
Cantonese pronunciation: a2
Meanings: mute

We use 口 (kou3 = 嘴 zui3, mouth), 嘴唇 (zui3 chun2 = mouth-lips = lips), 舌頭 (she2 tou2 = tongue-head = tongue), 聲帶 (sheng1 dai4 = sound-belt = vocal cords) to speak. 語言治療師 (yu3 yan2 zhi4 liao2 shi1 = speech-words-heal-cure-master) = speech therapist.

啞巴 (ya3 ba1 = mute-suffix) = 啞子 (ya3-zi0 = mute-son) = mute person. 天聾地啞 (tian1 long2 di4 ya3 = heaven-deaf-earth-mute) means natural deafness makes person mute. Deaf-mutes communicate by 手語 (shou3 yu3 = hand-speech = sign language), 面部表情 (mian4 bu4 biao3 qing2 = face-part-express-emotion = facial expressions).

啞劇 (ya3 ju2 = mute-drama) = mime. Interrogation/embarrassment renders person 啞口無言 (ya3 kou3 wu2 yan2 = mute-mouth-no-speech = speechless).

by Diana Yue