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

醉 (radical 酉 you3, liquor/wine + 卒 zu2, ultimate/die) means 醉酒 (zui4 jiu3 = intoxicated-with-wine/liquor): 微醉 (wei1 zui4 = slightly-drunk/tipsy), 大醉 (da4 zui4 = big/badly-drunk), 灌醉 (guan4 zui4 = pour-drunk = lure/coerce someone into getting drunk). Dish 醉雞 (zui4 ji1 = drunken-chicken) = wine-soaked chicken.

沉醉 (chen2 zui4 = sink/heavy-drunk) = intoxicated/engrossed. Sommelier 酒心品酒 (zui4 xin1 pin3 jiu3 = drunk-heart-relish/assess-wines = loves/wants wine-tasting art/career). 酉鬼 (zui4 gui3 = drunken-ghost = alcoholic) embraces 酉郞 (zui4 xiang1 = drunken-land = state of drunkenness).

麻醉 (ma2 zui4 = numb-drunk) = anesthesia. Escapist 麻醉夢死 (zui4 sheng1 meng4 si3 = drunken-life-dreaming-death = leads aimless/decadent life), 麻醉自己 (ma2 zui4 zi4 ji3 = benumb-own-self = makes himself insensitive/forget).

by Diana Yue