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

瞎 Putonghua pronunciation: xia1
Cantonese pronunciation: hat6
Meanings: blind

眼科 (yan3 ke1 = eye~subject = ophthalmology) doctor examines patient’s 眼睛 (yan3 jing1 = eye~iris = eyes), 視覺 (shi4 jue2 = see~sense = sense of sight), performs 角膜移植 (jue2 mo4 yi2 zhi2 = corner~membrane~move~plant = cornea transplant), removes 白內障 (bai2 nei4 zhang4 = white~internal~obstacle = cataracts).

瞎子 (xia1 zio = blind~son = 盲人 mang2 ren2 = blind~person) 看不見 (kan4 bu4 jian4 = see~not~see = cannot see), 失明 (shi1 ming2 = lose~light = go completely blind).

盲目 (mang2 mu4 = blind~eyed) = 瞎眼 (xia1 yan3 = blind~eyed) describes foolish/misguided/irresponsible behavior: 瞎說 (xia1 shuo1 = blind~talk/say = bluffing), 瞎忙 (xia1 mang2 = blind~busy = meaningless busy activities), 瞎猜 (xia1 qai1 = blind~/ unfounded~guess).

by Diana Yue