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 babies

Putonghua pronunciation: ying1
Cantonese pronunciation: ying1
Meanings: baby, infant

Ideogram 嬰 (two 壹 bei4, seashell/treasure + 女 nü3, female/daughter) suggests darling 嬰兒 (ying1 er2 = baby-child), not necessarily girl. 男嬰 (nan2 ying1 = male-baby = baby boys), 女 嬰 (nü3 ying1 = female-baby = baby girls) in 嬰兒床 (ying1 er2 chuang2 = baby-child-bed = baby-beds) fill maternity ward.

育婴常识 (yü4 ying1 chang2 shi1 = breed-baby-common-knowledge) = baby-care know-how. 換尿片 (huan4 niao4 pian4 = change-urine-piece = changing diapers), 嬰兒夜啼 (ying4 er2 ye4 ti2 = baby-child-night-cry = baby crying at night) drain parents' energy.

Orphanage adopts 棄婴 (qi4 ying1 = abandoned-babies). 聖婴 (sheng4 ying1 = holy-baby) = baby Jesus. 聖嬰效應 (sheng4 ying1 xiao4 ying4 = holy-baby-effect) is Chinese term for El Nino effect.

by Diana Yue