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 feeling miserable

Putonghua pronunciation: fan2
Cantonese pronunciation: faan4
Meanings: annoyance, irritation, worry, vexation

煩 = 火 (huo3, fire) + 頭 (ye4 = 頭 tou2, head), means headache/annoyance. 煩事 (fan2 shi4 = troublesomely/unpleasant matters) make us 心煩意亂 (xin1 fan2 yi4 luan4 = heart-worry-ideas-confused = worried/disturbed). 煩死了! (fan2 si3 le0 = annoy-dead-end) = It’s so troublesome/annoying!

麻煩 (ma2 fan2 = confuse-annoy) = trouble. Thugs 找他麻煩 (zhao2 ta1 ma2 fan2 = find-him-trouble) = give him trouble. 麻煩你 (ma2 fan2 ni3 = trouble-you) = “Please help to...”

煩惱 (fan2 nao3 = vexed-unhappy) = worries. “少年維特的煩惱” (shao4 nian2 wei2 te4 de0 fan2 nao3 = young-years-“Werther”-transliterated-’s-vexed-unhappy) is Chinese title of Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther. Poet laments life’s endless 煩憂 (fan2 you1 = vexation-worry = anxieties).

by Diana Yue