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 surgical operations

Putonghua pronunciation: kai1
Cantonese pronunciation: hoi1
Meaning: open, unfold, apart, ajar, start, off, reveal

開 (radical 門 men2, door + separating hands) means 打開 (da3 kai1 = break/rip-open/apart), 開始 (kai1 shi3 = open-start): 開門 (kai1 men2 = open-the-door), 開口 (kai1 kou3 = open-mouth), 走開 (zou3 kai1 = walk-off/away), 拉開 (la1 kai1 = pull/draw-open/apart) curtains, 分開 (fang4 kai1 = release/loosen-off) grip.

Doctors 開會 (kai1 hui4 = start/hold-meetings), 開方 (kai1 fang1 = show/make-prescriptions). Surgeon 開刀 (kai1 dao1 = open/wield-knife/scalpel = performs operation), 開腦 (kai1 nao3 = cuts-open-brain), 割開 (ge1 kai1 = cuts-open) cranium, 切開 (qie4 kai1 = slices-open) tissues.

Roses 開花 (kai1 hua1 = open/unfold-flower = bloom), gardener 開心 (kai1 xin1 = open-heart = feels happy/cheerful). 開飯了! (kai1 fan4 le0 = open-rice-ed) = “Lunch/dinner is served!”

by Diana Yue