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 the digestive system

**咽**

Putonghua pronunciation: *yan1*
Cantonese pronunciation: *yin1*
Meanings: swallow

咽 has radical 口 (kou3, mouth). Eating involves 咬嚼 (yao3 jüe2 = biting-chewing), 吞咽 (tun1 yan1 = swallowing). 食道 (shi2 dao4 = eat/food-channel) = alimentary canal. Kids/oldsters should 細細嚼, 慢慢咽 (xi4 xi0 jüe2, man4 man0 yan1 = fine-fine-chew, slow-slow-swallow = chew, swallow food carefully).

咽喉 (yan1 hou2 = swallow-throat) means throat or militarily-important narrow passageway. Wife 咽喉 (geng3 ye4 = choke-swallow = sobs) as dying husband 咽氣 (yan1 qi4 = swallow-breath = gasps for air).

狼吞虎咽 (lang2 tun1 hu3 yan1 = wolf-swallow-tiger-swallow) describes glutton gobbling/eating. Gourmet 垂涎 (chui2 yan2 = drip-saliva = lusts for) delicacies, but says junk-food 不能下咽 (bu4 neng2 xia4 yan1 = no-can-down-swallow = is absolutely inedible).

by Diana Yue