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: qie1, qie4
Cantonese pronunciation: chit3
Meaning: cut, incise, dissever, grate, intensive, imminent, anxious

切 (radical 刀 dao1, knife/blade) means 切开 (qie4 kai1 = cut/dissect-open/apart), 切断 (qie4 duan4 = cut-up/loose), 横切面 (heng2 qie1 mian4 = horizontal/crosswise-cut-face = cross-section); also: 急切 (ji1 qie4 = urgent-imminent), 切齿 (qie4 chi3 = grind-teeth angrily).

Police 救人心切 (jiu4 ren2 xin1 qie4 = save-person-heart-anxious = anxious to save lives), shoots hijackers. Partitioned country feels 切膚之痛 (qie4 fu1 zhi1 tong4 = cut-skin-'s-pain = direct pain/problem), 割切 (gei1 qie1 = cuts-severs) ties with invaders for 切身利益 (qie4 Shen1 li4 yi1 = own-self's-benefits-interests).

Surgeon studies 切片 (qie1 pian4 = incised-slice = biopsy), 切除 (qie1 chu2 = cuts-removes) tumor, puts patient in 深切治療 (shen1 qie4 zhi1 liao2 = deep-intensive-treat-heal = intensive-care) ward.

by Diana Yue