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 breathing

呼 (radical 口 kou3 = mouth)
Putonghua pronunciation: xi1
Cantonese pronunciation: kap1
Meanings: inhale, suck, absorb

吸 = in-take through mouth/nose. “深呼吸!” (shen1 hu1 xi1 = deep~exhale~inhale) = “Take a deep breath!” 吸管 (xi1 guan3 = suck-pipe) = drinking-straw. 吸煙 (xi1 yan1 = suck~smoke) = smoking cigarettes. Addicts 吸海洛英 (xi1 hai3 luo4 ying1 = smoke~"heroin"-transliterated). 吸煤気 (xi1 mei2 qi4 = suck/breathe-in~coal~gas) can cause coma/death.

Students 吸收 (xi1 shou1 = suck~gather = absorb) knowledge. Honey 吸引 (xi1 yin3 = suck~lure = attracts) ants. Octopus’s arms have 吸盤 (xi1 pan2 = suck~pan = suction-cups). Newton discovered 地心吸力 (di4 xin1 xi1 li4 = land/earth~centre~suck-power = power of gravity).

吸血鬼 (xi1 xue3 gui3 = suck~blood~ghosts) describes loan sharks. 吸血殭屍 (xi1 xue3 jiang1 shi1 = suck~blood~stiff/rigid~corpse) = vampires.

by Diana Yue