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: tu3, tu4
Cantonese pronunciation: to3
Meanings: exhale, spit, vomit, discharge

吐 = discharge through mouth/nose: 吐痰 (tu3 tan2 = spit-out-phlegm), 嘔吐 (ou3 tu4 = vomit-spit = vomiting), 吐血 (tu4 xue4 = vomit-blood). 吐露心聲 (tu3 lu4 xin1 sheng1 = spit-reveal-heart’s-sounds) = confess feelings. 吐苦水 (tu3 ku2 shui3 = spit-out-bitter-water) = tell unhappy experiences.


Persons with grudge 不吐不快 (bu4 tu3 bu4 kuai4 = no-spit/speak-no-cheer/happy = feel pressing desire to speak up). Underdog who overcomes hardships/discrimination finally 吐氣揚眉 (tu3 qi4 yang2 mei2 = blows-out-gas/air/anger-raises/arches-eye-brows = is proudly triumphant).

by Diana Yue