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 new-born babies

婴儿
Putonghua pronunciation: ying1
Cantonese pronunciation: ying1
Meaning: baby, infant

婴儿 (two 贝 bei4, 海 sheat/treasure + 女 nü3, female) means 婴儿 (ying1 er2 = baby-child): 男婴 (nan2 ying1 = male-baby = baby boy), 女婴 (nü3 ying1 = female-baby = baby girl).

Orphanage adopts 桑婴 (qi4 ying1 = abandoned-babies). 聖婴 (sheng4 ying1 = holy-infant) means baby Jesus. 聖婴 效应 (sheng4 ying1 xiao4 ying4 = holy-baby-result-effect) is Chinese term for El Niño effect.

Parents-to-be purchase 婴儿床 (ying1 er2 chuang2 = baby-bed/cot), 婴儿车 (ying1 er2 che1 = baby-pram), study 育婴常識 (yu4 ying1 chang2 shi1 = breed-baby-common-knowledge = baby-care know-how). 换尿片 (huan4 niao4 pian4 = change-urine-piece = changing diapers), 婴儿夜啼 (ying4 er2 ye4 ti2 = baby-child-night-cry = baby crying at night) test parents' skills/patience.

by Diana Yue