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 bio-chemical weapons

生
Cantonese pronunciation: saang1
Meanings: life, live, living, give birth to, beget, biology, biological

生 = 生命 (sheng1 ming4 = born-life = life). Pregnant woman 生產 (sheng1 chan3 = beget-produce = gives birth), baby 誕生 (dan4 sheng1 = born-life = is born). Factories 生產 (sheng1 chan3 = yield-produce) goods.

生物 (sheng1 wu4 = living-things/organism = plants/animals), 微生物 (wei1 sheng1 wu4 = micro-organisms) 生長 (sheng1 zhang3 = born-grow = grow). 生物學 (sheng1 wu4 xue2 = living-things-study) = biology. 生物鐘 (sheng1 wu4 zhong1 = biological-clock)'s ticking affects men/women's fertility.


by Diana Yue