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 pregnancy

Couple who want children throw away 安全套 (an1 quan2 tao4 = peace-safe-sac = condoms), 避孕藥 (bi4 yun4 yao4 = avoid-pregnant-drugs = contraceptives). Woman detects 懷孕 (huai2 yun4 = contain-womb = pregnancy) when 月經 (yue4 jing1 = moon/monthly-cycle = menstruation) stops, is congratulated “有喜!” (you2 xi3 = has-happiness = “Having baby is happy event!”) Embryo grows in 子宮 (zi3 gong1 = son’s-palace = uterus) during 孕婦 (yun4 fu3 = pregnant-woman)'s 懷孕期 (huai2 yun4 qi1 = pregnancy-period).

by Diana Yue