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

化
Putonghua pronunciation: hua4
Cantonese pronunciation: fa4
Meanings: transform, disintegrate, convert, suffixes “-ize”, “-fy”, chemistry, chemical

化 (showing 亻 and 之, two persons, back-to-back) = 变化 (bian4 hua4 = change-transform = transformation). 造化 (zao4 hua4 = create-transform) means Nature’s creation or person’s blessing/fortune. 教化 (jiao4 hua4 = teach-transform) means educate/civilize. 分化 (fen1 hua4 = split-transform) means split/divide.

化学 (hua4 xue2 = transformation-study/science = chemistry) studies changes/multiple natures of physical matter. 冰溶化 (rong2 hua4 = melts-disintegrates). Rocks 風化 (feng1 hua4 = are wind-disintegrated/eroded). 火化 (huo3 hua4 = fire-disintegrate) = burn/cremate. 魚化石 (yu2 hua4 shi2 = fish-transform-rock) = fish fossil. 綠化 (lü4 hua4 = greenize = greening) improves environment’s ecology.

化学武器 (hua4 xue2 wu3 qi4 = chemical-military-tools/instruments = chemical weapons) include 沙林毒氣 (sha1 lin2 du2 qi4 = “Sarin”-transliterated-poisonous-gas).

by Diana Yue