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

胎
Putonghua pronunciation: tai 1
Cantonese pronunciation: toi 1
Meanings: womb, foetus

胎生 (tai1 sheng1 = womb-born) = vivipara/viviparous. 接生婦 (jie2 sheng1 fu4 = receive-birth-woman = midwife) delivers 胎兒 (tai1 er2 = womb-child = baby), removes 胎衣 (tai1 yi1 = foetal-coat/membranes = afterbirth), 胎盤 (tai1 pan2 = foetal-disc = placenta). 脫胎換骨 (tu01 tai1 huan4 gu3 = leave-womb-change-bones) means thoroughly reformed/revitalized person’s metamorphosis.

頭胎 (tou2 tai1 = head/first-born) = firstborn/eldest child. 雙胞胎 (shuang1 bao1 tai1 = pair-uterus/womb-foetus) = twins. 各懷鬼胎 (ge4 huai2 gui3 tai1 = each-contain-ghost-foetus) describes antagonists secretly planning different conspiracies.

Pro-life/pro-choice debate discusses 墮胎 (duo4 tai1 = fall-foetus = 打胎, da3 tai1 = hit-foetus = abortion). 胎死腹中 (tai1 si3 fu4 zhong1 = foetus-dies-womb-inside) describes stillborn baby or aborted plans.

by Diana Yue