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 graduation

Putonghua pronunciation: lao2
Cantonese pronunciation: lo4
Meanings: toil, labor, tired

勞 (two火 huo3, fire + 力 li4, strength), means 勞動 (lao2 dong4 = labor~move = work/labor). Housewives 操勞 (ca01 lao2 = handle~labor = toil) everyday. Lazybones fancy 不勞而獲 (bu4 lao2 er2 huo4 = no~work~and/but~gain).

體力勞動 (ti3 li4 lao2 dong4 = body~strength~labor~move) = manual work. 勞動節 (lao2 dong4 jie2 = labor~move~festival = Labor Day, 1st May) honors 勞工階級 (lao2 gong1 jie1 ji2 = labor~work~steps~class = labor class). 勞資談判 (lao2 zi1 tan2 pan4 = labor~capital~talk~adjudicate) = employer and employees hold negotiations.

勤勞 (qin2 lao2 = diligent~hardworking) students may 過勞 (guo4 lao2 = over~labor = get overworked/tired). Air-planes fear 金屬疲勞 (jin1 shu3 pi2 lao2 = gold~kind~tired~labor = metal fatigue).

by Diana Yue