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 hospitalization

Putonghua pronunciation: hu4
Cantonese pronunciation: woo6
Meaning: protect, preserve, conserve, defend nurse


護法 (hu4 fa3 = defend-law/dharma/faith) = high-ranking judge/cleric. 護航 (hu4 hang2 = protect-sailing) describes warships escorting carrier or powerful supporters backing political motion. Biased person 護短 (hu4 duan3 = protect-short = support/defend wrong causes/people). 護花使者 (hu4 hua1 shi4 zhe1 = protect-flower-messenger) = lady’s escort/bodyguard.

護護人員 (yi1 hu4 ren2 yuan2 = doctor-nurse-people-personnel) = medics and paramedics. 護士 (hu4 shi4 = protect-person = nurses) 護理 (hu4 li3 = nurse-attend-to) patients.

by Diana Yue