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 medication effects

吐 (radical 口 kou3, mouth) = spit/eject; 吐痰 (tu4 tan2 = spit-out-phlegm), 吐字 (tu4 zi4 = enunciation-of-words), 吐露 (tu4 lu4 = spit-reveal = speaking one’s heart/mind). 吞吞吐吐 (tun1 tun1 tu4 tu4 = swallow-swallow-spit-spit) = stuttering/mincing words. 吞吐量 (tun1 tu4 liang4 = swallow-spit-quantity) = port’s handling volume.

吐苦水 (tu4 ku3 shui3 = spit-out-bitter-water) = complain/grumble. 氣功 (qi4 gong1 = breathing-exercises = qigong) is about 吐納 (tu4 na4 = spit-out-draw-in = exhaling-and-inhaling methods). 吐氣揚眉 (tu4 qi4 yang2 mei2 = exhale-breath-raise-eyebrows) describes winner’s proud/vindicated look.

Sea-sick person 嘔吐 (ou3 tu4 = vomits-throws-up).
Tuberculosis patient 吐血 (tu4 xue3 = spew-out-blood).
Stomach-flu causes 上吐下瀉 (shang4 tu4 xia4 xie4 = up-vomit-down-diarrhea = vomiting and diarrhea).

by Diana Yue