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

責 (radical 贝 bei4, sea-shell) = 職責 (zhi2 ze2 = profession/working-duties). Person with 責任心 (ze2 ren4 xin1 = duty-appoint-heart = sense of responsibility) 盡責 (jin4 ze2 = exhaust-duty = fulfills all duties). Irresponsible person 卸責 (xie4 ze2 = shrugs-off-responsibilities).

Strict parent 責問 (ze2 wen4 = blame-ask = questions/interrogates), 責罵 (ze2 ma4 = scolds-rebukes), 責罰 (ze2 fa2 = scolds-punishes) naughty kid. Kid fears 手責 (zhang4 ze2 = club-punish = punishment by flogging), not 薄責 (bo2 ze2 = light-scolding).

World 責責 (qian3 ze2 = accuse/condemn-scold = denounces) manufacturers/users of 生化武器 (sheng1 hua4 wu3 qi4 = biology-chemistry-military-tools/instruments = bio-chemical weapons). UN 責任 (fu4 ze2 = bears-responsibility to) investigate sarin-gas which 毒害 (du2 hai4 = poisoned-wounded/killed) thousands.

by Diana Yue