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 the fiscal cliff

堕
Putonghua pronunciation: duo4
Cantonese pronunciation: doh6
Meanings: drop, fall, sink, plunge

Ideogram 堕 shows person falling from slope onto 土 tu3, ground, means 下坠 (xia4 duo4 = downwards-drop/fall): 堕楼 (duo4 lou3 = fall-from/off-building), 堕海 (duo4 hai3 = fall-into-sea), 堕崖 (duo4 ya2 = fall-from/off-cliff).

Girl 誤堕陷阱 (wu4 duo4 xian4 jing3 = mistake-fall-into-plunge-trap) = gets tricked/trapped by mistake, 堕入風塵 (duo4 ru4 feng1 chen2 = fall-into-wind-dust = is stuck in shameful profession/life-style). 堕落 (duo4 luo4 = fall-down) means sink into poverty/immorality. 堕胎 (duo4 tai1 = drop-fetus) = abortion.

堕馬 (duo4 ma3 = fall-from/off-horse) describes jockey's fall from horse or person/businessman who made mistake/wrong judgment and was out of the race. Regretting 堕入塵網 (duo4 ru4 chen2 wang3 = fall-into-dust-net = life of worldly trappings), man turns monk/hermit.

by Diana Yue