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 passive waiting

待
Putonghua pronunciation: dai4
Cantonese pronunciation: doi6
Meanings: wait for, wait on, treat

待 (= 等待 deng3 dai4 = wait-attend) describes time/urgency: 待會 (dai4 hui4 = wait-a-moment), 待到 (dai4 dao4 = wait-arrive/ until), 不待 (bu4 dai4 = without-waiting-for = before).

Standby soldiers 待命 (dai4 ming4 = await-orders). Lost property 待領 (dai4 ling3 = wait-take) = waiting for collection. TV-sequel ends with 待續 (dai3 xü2 = wait-continue = to be cont’d). 待業數字 (dai4 ye4 shu4 zi4 = wait-employ-sum-word) = unemployment figures.


by Diana Yue