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 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 Hurricane Sandy

补
Putonghua pronunciation: qüe1
Cantonese pronunciation: kuet3
Meanings: missing, lacking, broken, chipped, deficient

缺 (radical 岔 fou3, pot) describes chipped/imperfect utensil. 月圆月缺 (yüe4 yüan2 yüe4 qüe1 = moon-round-moon-imcomplete) = moon’s wax and wane. 缺点 (qüe1 dian3 = lack-point) = weakness/flaw/deficiency. Members 缺席 (qüe1 xi2 = miss-seat = skip meeting) because agenda 缺少 (qüe1 shao3 = miss-lack = lacks) attraction. Tourists in Tibet often 缺氧 (qüe1 yang3 = lack-oxygen = suffer hypoxia).

空缺 (kong1 qüe1 = empty-lack) = job opening/vacancy. Greedy want 肥缺 (fei2 qüe1 = fat/lucrative-opening). 衣食無缺 (yi1 shi2 wu2 qüe1 = clothes-food-no-lack = getting adequately clothed and fed) is poor man’s dream.

Hurricane-stricken areas 缺水 (qüe1 shui3 = lack-water), 缺電 (qüe1 dian4 = lack-electricity), 缺藥 (qüe1 yao4 = lack-medicine). Relief-teams 缺錢 (qüe1 qian2 = lack-money/funding).

by Diana Yue