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 funerals

Putonghua pronunciation: si3
Cantonese pronunciation: sei2
Meaning: die, death, dead, extremely, stubborn, rigid

死 (radical 死 dai3, bad/evil) means 死亡 (si3 wang2 = die-death): 病死 (bing4 si3 = sick-die = die of illness), 跌死 (die1 si3 = fall-to-death), 死屍 (si3 shi1 = dead-corpses). Predator 殺死 (sha1 si3 = kill-die = kills) prey. 死士 (si3 shi4 = die-soldier) = man on death mission.

Husband's infidelity makes wife 氣死 (qi4 si3 = gas/angry-die = extremely annoyed/angry). Lottery-winner 樂死 (le2 si3 = happy-die = is overjoyed). However, 安樂死 (an1 le4 si3 = comfortably-cheerfully-die) means euthanasia/mercy-killing.

Operation 起死回生 (qi3 si3 hui2 sheng1 = raises-the-dead-back-to-life). Patient 死不去 (si3 bu4 qu4 = die-no-go = escapes death). Indeed, 生死有命 (sheng1 si3 you3 ming4 = life-death-have-fate = life and death are fixed/pre-determined)

by Diana Yue