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 sky

Putonghua pronunciation: ri4
Cantonese pronunciation: yat6
Meanings: sun

In Daoist terminology, 日 = 太陽 (tai4 yang2 = ultimate-yang/male essence), 月 (yue4, moon) = 太陰 (tai4 yin1 = ultimate-yin/female essence).

In Chinese mythology, 羿射九日 (Yi4 she4 jiu3 ri4 = skilled archer Yi shot down nine suns and left one shining). 天狗食日 (tian1 gou3 shi2 ri4 = heavenly-dog-ate-sun) causes 日蝕 (ri4 shi2 = sun-erode = solar eclipse). Rivaling camps insist 天無二日 (tian1 wu2 er4 ri4 = sky-doesn’t-have-two-suns = entire kingdom should allow only one king/leader).

日出 (ri4 chu1 = sun-out) = sunrise. 日子 (ri4 zi0 = sun/day-diminutive) means day. Man proposes to woman: 跟我過日子! (gen1 wo3 guo4 ri4 zi0 = follow-me-pass-days = Come live with me and be my spouse!)

by Diana Yue