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 World Expo

知
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi1
Cantonese pronunciation: ji1
Meanings: sense, awareness, know, knowledge

知 involves 知覺 (zhi1 jue2 = know-aware/feel = senses), 記憶 (ji4 yi1 = note-remember = memory), 經驗 (jing1 yan4 = pass-check = experience), 理解 (li3 jie3 = reason-unravel = understanding), 知識 (zhi1 shi1 = know-recognize = knowledge). 無知 (wu2 zhi1 = without-knowledge) = ignorant.

知道 (zhi1 dao4 = know-way) = knowing someone/something’s existence/occurrence. Responding to order/reminder, we say “知道了!” (zhi1 dao4 le0 = know-way-already = “Yes/understand/agreed!” 先知 (xian1 zhi1 = pre-know) = prophet. 後知後覺 (hou4 zhi1 hou4 jue2 = post-know-post-feel) = realizing/acting too late.

Good bosses 知人善任 (zhi1 ren2 shan4 ren4 = understand-person-well-give-duty = understand employees’ abilities, use them appropriately). 知足 (zhi1 zu2 = know/feel-enough) means contented at present status/gains.

by Diana Yue