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 Cup matches

杯 = 盃
Putonghua pronunciation: bei2
Cantonese pronunciation: booi1
Meanings: cup

杯 = container: 茶杯 (cha2 bei1 = tea-cup), 酒杯 (jiu3 bei1 = wine-glass), 量杯 (liang4 bei1 = measuring-cup). Party-goers 舉杯 (ju3 bei1 = raise-glasses), propose toast, 碰杯 (peng4 bei1 = clink-glasses), say “乾杯!” (gan1 bei1 = dry-cup/glass = “Bottoms up!”)

杯麵 (bei1 mian4 = cup-noodles) is convenient snack. 杯水車薪 (bei1 shui3 che1 xin1 = cup-water-cart-firewood) means small amount inadequate for relieving shortage/poverty.

獎盃 (jiang3 bei1 = award-cup) = cup trophy: 金盃 (jin1 bei1 = gold-cup), 銀盃 (yin2 bei1 = silver-cup). 足球迷 (zu2 qiu2 mi2 = foot-ball-infatuated = soccer fans) cheer as 世界盃 (shi4 ji4 bei1 = world-territory-cup = World Cup) winners proudly 捧盃 (peng3 bei1 = hold-raise cup trophy).

by Diana Yue