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 territorial disputes

爭 Putonghua pronunciation: zheng1 Cantonese pronunciation: jang1
Meanings: argue, argument, quarrel, contest, vie with, claim, fight for

爭 = argue/quarrel/contest/fight: 爭執 (zheng1 zhi2 = quarrel-grasp = quarrel), 爭論 (zheng1 lun4 = argue-debate), 爭奪 (zheng1 duo2 = fight-to-snatch/control).

Islands’ sovereignty causes 爭議 (zheng1 yi3 = quarrel-debate = controversy), raises 爭端 (zheng1 duan1 = quarrel-tip = reason for quarreling). Countries 爭吵 (zheng1 chao3 = quarrel-shout), insist on 寸土必爭 (cun4 tu2 bi4 zheng1 = inch-of-land-definitely-fight/claim = absolutely uncompromising over territory/advantages).

Idiom “鷸蚌相爭” (yü4 bang4 xiang1 zheng1 = kingfisher-clam-mutual-fight = clam holds kingfisher’s beak) means when two parties fight, a third party, fisherman, can take advantage — seize them both. Countries should drop 意氣之爭 (yi4 qi4 zhi1 zheng1 = feeling-temperament’s-argument = quarrel fuelled by temper/anger), 爭取 (zheng1 qü3 = fight-take = seek) cooperation.

by Diana Yue