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 age

代 代 (代 = ren2, people + ye4, move) = 代替 (代4 ti4 = replace-substitute), 代表 (代4 biao3 = represent-express = represent/representative), 代勞 (代4 lao2 = for-labour) = execute work/chore for another. Purchaser pays 代價 (代4 jia4 = represent-cost = cost). Cryptologist cracks 代碼 (代4 ma3 = represent-code = codes).

老一代 (lao3 yi1 dai4 = old-one-generation = older generation) and 新一代 (xin1 yi1 dai4 = new-one-generation = younger generation) have 代溝 (代4 gou1 = generation-gap).

by Diana Yue