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 lullabies

Putonghua pronunciation: yao2
Cantonese pronunciation: yiu1
Meaning: rhyme, folksong, ballad, rumour

谣 (radical 言 yan2, speech/words) = 歌谣 (ge1 yao2 = songs-rhymes), 民谣歌手 (min2 yao2 ge1 shou3 = folk-song-sing-er) plays 吉他 (ji1 ta1 = “guitar”-transliterated), 搖鼓 (yao2 gu3 = hand-swung-drum = tambourine).

谣言 (yao2 yan2 = rhyme-talk) = rumour, 謠傳 (yao2 chuan2 = rumour-pass = rumour says) government collapsed, but it's just dissidents 造謠生事 (zao4 yao2 sheng1 shi4 = make-rumour-born-event = spreading rumours, creating trouble).

Toddlers sing 童谣 (tong2 yao2 = children's-songs/rhymes = nursery rhymes): 小鴨子, 一身黃, 一搖一揹下池塘 (xiao3 ya1 zi0, yi1 shen1 huang2, yi1 yao2 yi1 bai3 xia4 chi2 tang2 = little-ducklings, whole-body-yellow, swaying-swaggering-go-down-the-pond), learn that 黃 (huang2, yellow) rhymes with 塘 (tang2, pond).

by Diana Yue