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 memory

記 記 (radical 言 yan2, words) = 記憶 (ji4 yi1 = remembrances/recollections). Prehistoric men 結繩記事 (jie2 sheng2 ji4 shi4 = knot-rope-remember-thing/event = tied knots on ropes as reminders), Historian 記錄 (ji4 lu4 = records-notes-down) events. 日記 (ri4 ji4 = day-record) = diary.

記者 (ji4 zhe3 = report-er) 記敘 (ji4 xu4 = records-narrates) happenings. Student makes 記號 (ji4 hao4 = record-marks = markings) in book, 牢記 (lao2 ji4 = firmly-memorizes) text. 死記 (si3 ji4 = dead-memorize) = rote-learning.

Vengeful person 記仇 (ji4 chou2 = remembers-wrongs/offences = cannot forget/forgive others who offended/ill-treated him). Dementia patient 記憶力 (ji4 yi1 li4 = remember-recollect-power = memory power), 記不起 (ji4 bu4 qi3 = remember-no-up = cannot remember) people/things.

by Diana Yue