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 dolphins

豚
Putonghua pronunciation: tun2
Cantonese pronunciation: tuen4
Meanings: pig, suckling pig, rat-like animal

豚 (radical 月 = 肉 rou4, flesh/meat) means 豬 (zhu1, pig) or plump/squabby mammal. 豬鼠 (tun2 shu3 = piglet-rat) = guinea pig. Japanese love 河豚 (he2 tun2 = river-piglet = Japanese “fugu” = pufferfish/blowfish) sashimi.

海豚 (hai2 tun2 = sea-pig = dolphins) and 鼠海豚 (shu3 hai3 tun2 = rat-sea-pigs = porpoises) are 齒鯨 (chi3 jing1 = toothed-whales) evolved from 哺乳類動物 (bu4 ru3 lei4 dong4 wu4 = feed-milk-genre-moving-thing = mammals).

Dolphins/porpoises 群居 (qun2 jü1 = group-live = live together) in schools/pods, have high 智力 (zhi4 li4 = wise-strength = intelligence), use 呼喚 (hu1 xiao1 = exhale-soughing = whistling) and 歌聲 (ge1 sheng1 = song-sound = singing) to 溝通 (gou1 tong1 = gap-through = communicate).

by Diana Yue