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

Putonghua pronunciation: yūe4
Cantonese pronunciation: yeuk6
Meanings: leap forward, jump forward, vault

躍 (radical 足 zhu1, foot) = 跃躍 (tiao4 yūe4 = jump-leap-forward). 飛躍 (fei1 yūe4 = fly-leap) describes rapid progress. 躥躍首位 (yūe4 jū1 shou3 wei4 = leap-occupy-head-position) = rise/leap to head of list. China launched 大躍進 (da4 yūe4 jin4 = the Great Leap Forward) in 1950s.

Seeing attractive advertisement, people 踐躍欲試 (yūe4 yūe4 yū4 shi4 = leap-leap-desire-try = are eager to try), 踐躍報名 (yong3 yūe4 bao4 ming2 = dance-leap-report-name =rush to apply).

Documentaries show 碧海藍天 (bi3 hai3 lan2 tian1 = turquoise-sea-blue-sky), dolphins 衝浪 (chong1 lang4 = dash-against-waves = surfing), 越起 (yūe4 qi3 = jumping-up), 轉身 (zhuan4 shen1 = turning/spinning-bodies), 翻筋斗 (fan1 jin1 dou3 = turn-over-loop = doing somersaults).

by Diana Yue