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 speech-making

講 (radical 言 yan2, words) means talk/explain/discuss: 講者 (jiang3 zhe3 = speak-er), 講師 (jiang3 shi1 = speak-teacher = lecturer), 講故事 (jiang3 gu4 shi0 = talk-about-past-events = tell stories), 講價 (jiang3 gu4 shi0 = talk-price = bargain/haggle), 講和 (jiang3 he2 = reach-peaceful-settlement).

農民講習所 (nong2 min2 jiang3 xi2 suo3 = peasant-people's-lecture-practice-building = Guangzhou’s Peasant Movement Training Institute, 1924-26) ran 講座 (jiang3 zuo4 = talk-seat = lectures). KMT and CCP leaders 演講 (yan2 jiang33 = perform/gave-talks), 講課 (jiang3 ke4 = taught-lessons), 講述 (jiang3 shu4 = spoke-on-gave-account-of) China’s revolution.

Hongkong movie depicts triads 講數 (jiang3 shu4 = Cantonese “gong2 so3” = discussing/negotiating-sums/terms) and, failing that, 講手 (jiang3 shou3 = Cantonese “gong2 sau2” = discussing-hands = starting fight/brawl).

by Diana Yue