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 furniture

Putonghua pronunciation: shīl
Cantonese pronunciation: sik1
Meaning: fit, proper, suitable, moderate, proper, comfortable, leisurely

適 (radical 亻, chuo4, walk) = 適合 (shīl he2 = suit-fit/proper), 適宜 (shīl yi2 = fit/suitable-recommendable). 適中 (shīl zhòng1 = fit-middle) = middle-range/acceptable. 適齡 (shīl lìng2 = suitable-age) = in right age-bracket for school/marriage etc.

庭院桌椅 (ting2 yuán4 zuó1 yī3 = court-yard-tables-chairs = patio furniture) has 舒適 (shū1 shīl = relaxed-comfortable), 閒適 (xián2 shīl = leisurely-comfortable) feel. 不適 (bu4 shīl = not-comfortable = ill/sick) person needs 適當 (shīl dāng4 = suitable-proper) nursing.

Housewife 適應 (shīl yīng4 = suit-respond = adapts to) downsized apartment, cuts 家具 (jia1 jù4 = home-furniture) to 適量 (shīl liáng4 = suitable-amount). Designer advises: “適可而止!” (shīl ke3 er2 zhi3 = just-right-acceptable-and-stop = “That’s enough, don’t overdo it!”)

by Diana Yue