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 dragons

亢 = high. Soprano/tenor’s voices are 高亢 (gao1 kang1 = tall-high). Desert climate is 亢旱 (kang4 han4 = high-drought = arid). Liquor-drinkers easily get 亢奮 (kang1 fen4 = high-excited).

Chinese fortune-telling forecasts person/institution/country's fortune by interpreting 鬝 (gua4, six-line diagrams with cryptic names) from the ancient classic《易經》(yi4 jing1 = I Ching = changes-classic = Book of Changes), e.g. 潛龍勿用 (qian2 long2 wu4 yong4 = submerged-dragon-not-used = lack of fortune/recognition), 飛龍在天 (fei1 long2 zai4 tian1 = flying-dragon-in-sky = waxing/zenith of fortune), 亢龍有悔 (kang4 long2 you3 hui4 = too-high-dragon-has-regret = waning/diminishing of fortune).

Wise/well-bred people’s behavior to other is 不亢不卑 (bu4 kang4 bu4 bei1 = not-haughty-not-lowlly = neither haughty nor self-humiliating).

by Diana Yue