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

嬉
Putonghua pronunciation: xi1
Cantonese pronunciation: hei1
Meanings: play, romp, have fun, frolic

嬉 (女 nü3, female + 喜 xi3, delight) = romp/play. Children 嬉笑 (xi1 xiao4 = playfully-laugh), 嬉戱 (xi1 xi4 = play-game = play cheerfully). 嬉春 (xi1 chun1 = play-spring) describes people/animals/birds frolicking in springtime or boy-and-girl romantic chase.

Essayist 嬉笑怒罵 (xi1 xiao4 nu4 ma4 = playfully-joke-angrily-accuse = make funny/sarcastic/angry/tern statements). 嬉皮笑臉 (xi1 pi2 xiao4 lian3 = playful-skin-laughing-face) = superficially cheerful/flirtatious/nonchalant expression. 嬉皮士 (xi1 pi2 shi4 = playful-skin-scholar) is Chinese transliteration of “hippy/hippies”.

Dolphin-watch show dolphins 嬉戱 (xi1 xi4 = romping-playing), 跳躍 (tiao4 yue4 = jump-leap), 嬉鬧 (xi1 nao4 = play/romp-make-noise/fight = play-fight), 躍過 (yue4 guo4 = leap over) waves. Incoming ship welcomes dolphins 領航 (ling3 hang2 = lead-sail = lead the way).

by Diana Yue