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 promotion

獎
Cantonese pronunciation: jeung2
Meanings: praise, encourage, reward, award, commendation, prize

獎 (radical犬 qüan3, dog) originally meant spurring dog on. Now 獎 means 獎勵 (jiang3 li4 = honor/award-encourage with gift/words). 獎劵 (jiang3 qüan4 = prize-ticket = lottery) buyers dream of 中獎 (zhong4 jiang3 = hit-target-prize = getting prize), 領獎 (ling3 jiang3 = receiving-prize); 頭獎 (tou2 jiang3 = head-prize = first prize), 二獎 (er4 jiang3 = second-prize), 三獎 (san1 jiang3 = third-prize).

Writers/scholars/athletes compete for 奧運獎牌 (Ao4 yün4 jiang3 pai2 = “O” lympics-transliterated-sports-award-plaque = Olympics medal), 諾貝爾獎 (Nuo4 Bei4 Er3 jiang3 = “Nobel”-transliterated-prize).

A-student gets 獎學金 (jiang3 xüe2 jin1 = award-study-gold/money = scholarship). Dedicated employee gets 勤工獎 (qin2 gong1 jiang3 = diligent-work-prize = good/full attendance prize), 獎金 (jiang3 jin1 = prize-gold/money = bonus).

by Diana Yue