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 manipulating stockmarkets

吞
Putonghua pronunciation: tun1
Cantonese pronunciation: tan1
Meanings: swallow

吞 (radical 口 kou3, mouth) = swallow. 吞吞吐吐 (tun1 tun1 tu4 tu4 = swallow-swallow-spit-spit) describes stammering person. 吞吐量 (tun1 tu4 liang4 = swallow-spit-volume) = port/network’s cargo/throughput volume. Sea 吞没 (tun1 mo4 = swallows- covers/ vanishes = buries) sunken boat.

忍雲吐霧 (tun1 yu2 tu4 wu4 = swallow-cloud-spit-fog) describes heavy-smoker smoking. 生吞活剝 (sheng1 tun1 huo2 bo1 = alive-swallow-living-peel) describes swallowing of theories without comprehension.

狮 吞噬 (ten1 shi4 = swallows-bites/eats) prey. Big firm 吞併 (tun1 bing4 = swallows-amalgamates = takes over) small firm in M&A. Speculators 鯨吞 (jing1 tun1 = whale-swallow = makes gigantic gains on) losers’ 股票 (gu3 piao4 = stocks-tickets/papers = securities), 外汇 (wai4 hui4 = foreign-transfer = foreign currencies) as market collapses.

by Diana Yue