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 austerity measures

量 = measure quantity: 量杯 (liang2 be1 = measuring-cup), 容量 (rong2 liang4 = contain-quantity = volume), 産量 (chan3 liang4 = production-volume), 度量衡 (du4 liang4 heng2 = weights-and-measurements). 器量窄 (qi4 liang4 zhai3 = vessel-volume-narrow) describes mean person. 酒量浅 (jiu3 liang4 qian3 = wine-capacity-shallow) = can't drink much wine.

有份量 (you3 fen4 liang4 = has-portion-capacity) describes heavyweight professional. 不自量力 (bu4 z1i4 liang4 li4 = no-self-measure-strength) describes praying-mantis resisting cart-wheel, i.e. acting beyond means, while 量力而为 (liang4 li4 er2 wei2 = measure-strength-then-act) means acting within means.

量化寬鬆 (liang4 hua4 kuan1 song1 = quantity-ize-broad-loosen = quantitative easing, QE) actually means 大量發債 (da4 liang4 fa1 zhai4 = big-amount-issue-debts/bonds = massive borrowing).

by Diana Yue