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 quarrelling

翻 (fan1, turn/round + 羽 yu3, feathers/wings) means flip over. 翻動 (fan1 dong4 = turn-move) = stir/move. Stormy waves 翻騰 (fan1 teng2 = roll-surge). Acrobat 翻跟斗 (fan1 gen1 dou3 = turn-heel-bin = turn somersaults). Translator 翻譯 (fan1 yue4 = flips-through-reads) references. 翻譯 (fan1 yi4 = turnover-translates) documents.

翻臉 (fan4 lian3 = turn-away-face) = break friendship/alliance. Partners fight over 翻一番 (fan1 yi1 fan1 = turn-over-one-time = doubled) profits, 鬧翻 (nao4 fan1 = quarrel-overturn = break up).

Convicted politician appeals, 翻案 (fan1 an4 = overturns-verdict), 翻身 (fan1 shen1 = fan1 shen1 = turn-body = is restored/rehabilitated to respectable status). Enemies fear he might 翻舊賬 (fan1 jiu4 zhang4 = turn-out-old-accounts = challenge them with old issues/offences).

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