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 foreign currencies

增 (zeng1)
Cantonese pronunciation: jang1
Meanings: add, increase, grow

增 is opposite of 减 (jian3, decrease): 增多 (zeng1 duo1 = increase~more = grow), 减少 (jian2 shao3 = decrease~less = shrink), 增重 (zeng1 zhong4 = increase~weight), 减肥 (jian3 fei2 = subtract~fat = dieting/exercising to lose weight). Central bank decides 增減 (zeng1 jian3 = grow~shrink = varying~raising and lowering) of interest rates.

GDP’s 增長 (zeng1 zhang3 = increase~lengthen = growth) makes employment figures 倍增 (bei4 zeng1 = one-time~ increase = double), citizen’s average income 增加 (zeng1 jia1 = increase~grow), spending power 增強 (zeng1 qiang2 = grow~ stronger).

Travelling helps us 增廣見聞 (zeng1 guang3 jian4 wen2 = increase~broad~see~hear = broaden our exposure/knowledge). Host welcomes guest: “Thank you for 增光!” (zeng1 guang1 = add~light = honoring this occasion!)

by Diana Yue