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

Putonghua pronunciation: yong4
Cantonese pronunciation: yung6
Meanings: use, apply, consume, employ, spend, expenses

Pictogram 用 resembles useful bucket, means 使用 (shi3 yong4 = employ-use): 用水 (yong4 shui3 = use-water), 用钱 (yong4 qian3 = use/spend-money), 用力 (yong4 li4 = use-effort/force). 用心学 (yong4 xin1 xue2 = use-heart/study) = study attentively/hard. 用人惟親 (yong4 ren4 wei2 qin1 = engage~people~only~family/relatives) = nepotism.

用戶 (yong4 hu4 = user/customer~household) pays 費用 (fei4 yong4 = spend-use = fees/charges). Engineering is 應用 (yong4 yon4 = apply-use = applied) science. 軍轉民用 (jun1 zhan3 min2 yong4 = military~transfer~civil/people~use) = convert military industries into industries mass-producing for social consumption.

Impoverished government 緊縮開支 (jin3 suo1 kai1 zhi1 = tight-shrink-open-pay = imposes austerity measures). 有用 (you3 yong4 = has~use = useful)? 無用 (wu2 yong4 = no-use)?

by Diana Yue