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

激 Putonghua pronunciation: ji1
Cantonese pronunciation: gik1
Meanings: stir, shake, stimulate, irritate, heated, emotional

激 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) = stir/stimulate/irritate. Music 激發 (ji1 fa1 = stirs-up) listener's 激情 (ji1 qing2 = violent-emotions/passions). Student expresses 感激 (gan3 ji1 = feel-passionate = gratitude) to mentor, 激素 (ji1 su4 = stimulating-essence) = hormone. 激光 (ji1 guang1 = stimulated-light/ray/beam) = LASER.
Conservatives dislike 激進派 (ji1 jin4 pai4 = passionate-advance-sector = radicals), denounce their 激烈 (ji1 lie = stirred-up-strong = violent) actions as 過激 (guo4 ji1 = over-radical = too extreme).
Quarrelling parties 激辯 (ji1 bian4 = hotly-debate/argue). One side uses 激將法 (ji1 jiang4 fa3 = irritate-general-method = tactic of provoking/angering opponent), says 刺激 (ci4 ji1 = prick-irritate = stirring/provocative) words, makes opponent 激動 (ji1 dong4 = irritated-roused) and commit blunder.