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 speech-making

問 (radical 門 men2, door + □ kou3, mouth) means ask: 問號 (wen4 hao4 = question-mark), 問路 (wen4 lu4 = ask-road = ask for road direction), 問好 (wen4 hao3 = ask-good = convey fond regards). Nosy person 問長問短 (wen4 chang2 wen4 duan3 = ask-long-ask-short = asks various/endless questions).

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問題 (wen2 ti2 = ask-subject) = questions/problems.


Street-vendor distributes 問卷 (wen4 jüan4 = ask-scroll = questionnaires), invites passers-by to 提問 (ti2 wen4 = raise-questions), but 無人過問 (wu2 ren2 guo4 wen4 = no-person-pass-ask = nobody pays attention).

by Diana Yue