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 storytelling

Putonghua pronunciation: shuo1
Cantonese pronunciation: suet3
Meaning: say, talk, speak, tell, explain, narrate, account

說 (radical 言 yan2, words/speech) = 說話 (shuo1 hua4 = speak-say things): 說明 (shuo1 ming2 = say-understand = explain), 說服 (shuo1 fu2 = say-convince = successfully persuade), 說不 (shuo4 bu4 = say-no = refuse), 說真話 (shuo1 zhen1 hua4 = say-truthful/honest-words). Humans/parrots/lawyers 會說話 (hui4 shuo1 hua4 = can/adept-speak = can talk).

People surround 說謊 (shuo1 huang3 = tell-lie = lying) official, 討說法 (tao3 shuo1 fa3 = beg/demand-say-method = demand an explanation).

説故事 (shuo1 gu4 shi4 = say-old-events) = tell stories. In ancient China, 說書人 (shuo1 shu1 ren2 = tell-books-person = storytellers) told stories to crowds: “Long ago, someone 說道 (shuo1 dao4 = said-spoke ...”) That's how 小說 (xiao3 shuo1 = little-talk = fiction/novels) originated.

by Diana Yue