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 islands and atolls

礁 (radical 石 shi2, stone/rock/reef) means 礁石 (jiao1 shi2 = reef-rock) in sea. 群岛 (qün2 dao3 = group-of-islands = archipelagos) consist of 島 (dao3, islands), 礁 (jiao1, reefs), 珊瑚岛 (shan1 hu2 dao3 = coral-islands), 環礁湖 (huan2 jiao1 hu2 = ring-reef-lake/lagoon = atolls), 沙洲 (sha1 zhou1 = sand- banks = shoals/sandbanks/cays/keys). Scuba-divers frequent 大堡礁 (Da4 Bao3 Jiao1 = Great-Barrier-Reef, Australia).

In 南海 (Nan2 Hai2 = South-Sea, aka 南中國海 = South-China-Sea)'s 南沙群島 (Nan2 Sha1 Qün2 Dao3 = South-Atolls-Group-of-Islands = Nansha Islands, aka Spratly Islands), countries claim sovereignty over 島礁 (dao3 jiao1 = islands-islets).

觸礁 (chu4 jiao1 = touch-reef) describes ship hitting 暗礁 (an4 jiao1 = dark-reef = hidden/submerged rock) or plan thwarted, stalled.

by Diana Yue