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 reunion gatherings

聚
Putonghua pronunciation: jū4
Cantonese pronunciation: jui6
Meanings: concentrate, assemble, gather, congregate

聚 shows three人 (ren2, person) at bottom, means concentrate/assemble. 聚會 (jū4 hui4 = gather~meet) = meeting/assembly. Bees 聚居 (jū4 jū1 = concentrate~live = swarm) in hives. Family meet for Thanksgiving 團聚 (tuan2 jū4 = circle~gather = reunion). 物以類聚 (wu4 yi2 lei4 jū4 = things~by~types~assemble) = birds of a feather flock together.

Election-candidate organizes 聚餐 (jū4 can1 = gather~feast = banquet parties) to 凝聚 (ning2 jū4 = solidify~gather = consolidate) faction support.

Old friends 聚首一堂 (jū4 shou2 yī1 tang2 = assemble~heads~one~hall), cherish 重聚 (chong2 jū4 = again~meet = reunion gathering), lament 聚散無常 (jū4 san4 wu2 chang2 = gather~disperse~not~regular/frequent = Life has no certainty — when shall we next come together or drift apart?)

by Diana Yue