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 hawkers

Putonghua pronunciation: bai 3
Cantonese pronunciation: baa1 2
Meanings: wave, wriggle, put display, sway

擺 (radical 手 = hand shou3, hand) means waving hand/arm. 擺手 (bai2 shou3 = wave hand/arm) = wave hand/arm to accost/dissmiss. 擺脫 (bai3 tuo1 = wave/wriggle-free) = struggle free. Cupboards 擺放 (bai3 fang4 = place-put = contain/hold) food/kitchenware. Interior designers use 擺設 (bai3 she4 = display-furnish = decorative items) artistically.

In 市集 (shi4 ji2 = market-gatherings = marketplaces) hawkers 擺地攤 (bai3 di4 tan1 = place-ground-stand = display goods on the ground), 擇賣 (bai3 mai4 = display-sell) goods. In supermarkets shelves 擇滿 (bai2 man3 = place-full = are stacked with) goods.

大搖大擺 (da4 yao2 da4 bai3 = big-wave-big-sway) describes swaggering/haughty people. 擇擺不定 (yao2 bai3 bu2 ding4 = wave-sway-not-steady) describes unpredictable market trends or fickle/wavering politicians.

by Diana Yue