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

漁 (yü2)
Cantonese pronunciation: yue4
Meaning: fish, fishing, acquire

Verb 漁 (yü2), water-drops + 魚 yü2, fish = fishing. 漁夫 (yü2 ful1 = fisher-man) rows 漁舟 (yü2 zhou1 = fishing-boat/skiff), 釣魚 (diao4 yü2 = angle-for-fish). 漁民 (yü2 min2 = fishing-people = fishermen) operate 拖網漁船 (tu01 wang3 yü2 chuan2 = drag-net-fishing-vessel = trawlers).


Womanizers 漁色 (yü2 se1 = fish/catch-color = exploit women).

漁業 (yü2 ye4 = fishing-industry) interests cause clashes in 南中國海 (Nan2 Zhong1 Guo2 Hai2 = South-China-Sea). Sage warns: 鱗蚌相爭, 漁人得利 (yü4 bang4 xiang1 Zheng1, yü2 ren2 de2 li4, sandpiper-clam-mutual-fight, fisher-man-takes-advantage = Sandpiper and Clam fight; Fisherman/third-party grabs both!)

by Diana Yue