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 arithmetics

加 加 (力 li4, strength/effort + 回 kou3, mouth/shout) suggests enhancing effort by shouting, hence 加上 (jia1 shang4 = add-on or also/plus), 加快 (jia1 kuai4 = increase-speed), 加盟 (jia1 meng2 = join-alliance).

加入 (jia1 ru4 = add-in): Cook 加油加糖 (jia1 you2 jia1 tang2 = adds-oil-adds-sugar) to dishes. However, 加鹽加醋 (jia1 yan2 jia1 cu4 = add-salt-add-vinegar) describes gossip exaggerating story. Swimming champion’s fans shout “加油!” (jia1 you2 = add-petrol = step on the gas, “Go, go, go!”)

加數 (jia1 shu4 = adding-sum) = addition. 十加二 (shi2 jia1 er4 = ten-plus-two) equals twelve. But 加租 (jia1 zui1 = raising-rent), 加税 (jia1 shui4 = raising-taxes), 加價 (jia1 jia4 = raising-prices) are unpopular measures.

by Diana Yue