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 moving

家
Putonghua pronunciation: jia1
Cantonese pronunciation: ga1
Meanings: family, home

家 means family/home: 家鄉 (jia1 xiang1 = home-village), 家人 (jia1 ren2 = family-persons/members). Speaker greets audience: “大家好!” (da4 jia1 hao3 = big-family-good = “Hello, everybody!”)

Husband 回家 (hui2 jia1 = returns-home) after work. 家裡 (jia1 li3 = family-inside = at home), 家庭主婦 (jia1 ting2 zhu3 fu4 = home-porch-principle-woman = family’s mistress = housewife) cooks dinner, does 家務 (jia1 wu4 = family-errands = housework).

搬家 (ban1 jia1 = move-family = moving house) involves packing 家私 (jia1 si1 = home-private = furniture), 家電 (jia1 dian4 = home-electric = home electric appliances). Adventurer abandons 家園 (jia1 yuan2 = home-garden = home plots), 四海為家 (si4 hai3 wei2 jia1 = four-seas-are-home = roams the world).

by Diana Yue