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 presidential elections


挑選 (tiao1 xüan3 = pick-choose) + 舉手 (jü2 shou3 = raising-hands to approve/endorse) = 選舉 (xüan3 jü2 = select-raise/elevate = elect/election). 直接選舉 (zhi2 jie1 xüan3 jü2 = straight-catch-elect-raise) = direct elections.

US presidential election is 間接選舉 (jian4 jie1 xüan3 jü2 = separated-catch-elect-raise = indirect elections). Voters pick from parties’ 候選人 (hou4 xüan3 ren2 = wait-for-elect-person = candidates): 二選一 (er4 xüan3 yi1 = out-of-two-pick-one).

by Diana Yue