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

减 (radical 亠 = 水 shui3, water) means reduce/decrease. As typhoon 减弱 (jian3 ruo4 = diminishes-weaken), rain 减少 (jian3 shao3 = decreases-lessens). Obese person 减低 (jian3 di1 = reduces-lowers) meat intake to 减肥 (jian3 fei2 = reduce-fat/weight, cut pounds).

In slow economy, factories 减产 (jian3 chan3 = cut-production), shops 减价 (jian3 jia4 = lower-prices). Government 續减 (suo1 jian3 = shrinks/tightens-reduces) expenditure, 减税 (jian3 shui4 = cuts-taxes), 减租 (jian3 zu1 = lowers-rent) to 减轻 (jian3 qing1 = reduce-lighten) citizens’ burden.

减数 (jian3 shu4 = subtraction-sum) = subtraction. 十减二 (shi2 jian1 er4 = ten-minus-two) equals eight. But 偷工减料 (tou1 gong1 jian3 liao4 = steal-work-reduce-materials) means dishonestly supplying insufficient manpower/materials, hence producing sub-standard work.

by Diana Yue