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 Jonah and the whale

避 (radical 亠 = boat) means 避開 (bi4 kai1 = run-from-away = stay away from), 避免 (bi4 mian3 = run-from-spared = avoid). 避孕藥 (bi4 yün4 yao4 = avoid-pregnant-drugs) = contraceptives. 避暑 (bi4 shu3 = avoid-summer-heat) = spend summer in cool place. 避風港 (bi4 feng1 gang3 = avoid-wind-harbour) = typhoon shelter.

Boxer 避 (shan3 bi4 = flash-avoid = darts away from) blow. Escapee seeks 避難所 (bi4 nan4 suo3 = avoid-disaster-house = refuge). To 避嫌 (bi4 xian2 = avoid-suspect = avoid being suspected of infamous connections), bureaucrat never enters casinos.

Prophet 約拿 (yüe4 na2 = “Jonah”-transliterated) 躲避 (duo3 bi4 = hide-avoid = fled) God, but 避無可避 (bi4 wu2 ke3 bi4 = avoid-no-can-avoid = was cornered).

Putonghua pronunciation: bi4
Cantonese pronunciation: bei6
Meanings: avoid, flee from