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

Putonghua pronunciation: cheng2
Cantonese pronunciation: sing4
Meaning: ride, multiply by, time (verb), take advantage of

乘 (radical 亖 ) means ride/multiply by:

乗車 (cheng2 che1 = ride-car/bus/vehicle), 乘客 (cheng2 ke4 = ride-guest = passenger), 乘機 (cheng2 jil1 = ride-airplane) also means take advantage of opportunity. Victor 乘勝追擊 (cheng2 sheng4 zui1 jil1 = ride-on-victory-pursue-attack = pursues opponent without letting him pause/recuperate).

乘法 (cheng2 fa3 = multiply-method) = 乘數 (cheng2 shu4 = multiply-sum) = multiplication. 十乘二 (shi2 cheng2 er4 = ten-multiply-by-two) equals 二十 (er4 shi2 = two-ten = twenty), i.e. twenty is 兩倍 (liang3 bei4 = two-times) of ten.

Kids memorize 乘數表 (cheng2 shu4 biao3 = multiplication-numbers-table = multiplication table). Naïve stocks-buyer believes his investments will 乘十萬倍 (cheng2 shi2 wan4 bei4 = multiply-by-ten-ten-thousand-times = grow 100,000 times).

by Diana Yue