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

鲸 (radical 魚 yü2, fish) = 鮨魚 (jing1 yü2 = whale-fish): 藍鯨 (lan2 jing1 = blue-whale), 殺人鲸 (sha1 ren2 jing1 = kill-people-whale = orca/killer whale). 鯨飲 (jing1 yin3 = whale-drink) = drinking alcohol voluminously. 鯨吞 (jing1 tun1 = whale-swallow) describes aggressor’s big takeover.

Melville’s novel describes 捕鯨船 (bu3 jing1 chuan2 = capture-whale-ship = whaler)’s pursuit of 白鯨 (bai2 jing1 = white-whale) called 無比敵 (wu2 bi3 di2 = in-comparable-enemy = “Moby Dick”-transliterated).

上帝 (shang4 di4 = above-emperor = God) commanded prophet 約拿 (yüe4 na2 = “Jonah”-transliterated) to preach in Nineveh. Jonah refused, boarded ship. God raised 風暴 (feng1 bao4 = wind-violent = storm). Jonah was thrown overboard, 吞下 (tun1 xia4 = swallowed-down) by whale.

by Diana Yue