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 mahjong

四 (si4)

Cantonese pronunciation: sei3

Meanings: four

四 = four: 四方行 (si4 fang1 xing2 = four-sided-form = quadrangle), 四周 (si4 zhou1 = four-rim = surroundings), 四歳 (si4 sui4 = four-years old), 四季 (si4 ji4 = four-seasons).

四份 (si4 fen4 yi1 = four-parts-one) = a quarter. 第四 (di4 si4 = order-four) = fourth. 四月 (si4 yue4 = fourth-month/month) = April. 不三不四 (bu4 san1 bu4 si4 = neither-three-nor-four) describes person/work/words that are not pertinent, not good enough, not decent.

Idiom 四面楚歌 (si4 mian4 Chu3 ge1 = four-side-Chu-state's-songs) means surrounded by enemy's armies, soon to be vanquished. 攻打四方城 (gong1 da3 si4 fang1 cheng2 = attack-beat-four-sided-city/citadel) means playing mahjong - players arrange mahjong tiles in four rows before starting the game.

by Diana Yue