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 the Olympic Games

競

Putonghua pronunciation: jìng4
Cantonese pronunciation: gîng6
Meanings: pursue, contend, vie, compete

Ideogram 競 shows identical pair running, i.e. competing. 競賽 (jìng4 sai4 = compete-contend = 比賽 bi3 sai4 = compare-contend) = competition. Applicants 競逐 (jìng4 zhu2 = compete-pursue = vie for) opening. 群芳競豔 (qún2 fāng1 jìng4 yan4 = group-fragrant-compete-beauty) describes pretty blooms coming out together or girls in beauty contest.

In 競選 (jìng4 xuān3 = compete-select = election), candidates 競爭 (jìng4 zèng1 = compete-fight/vie = compete). Tough company survives 市場競爭 (shì4 chang3 jìng4 zèng1 = market-field-compete-fight/vie = market competition).

Athletes 競技 (jìng4 jì4 = compete-skills = compete in sports).

龍舟競渡 (lóng2 zhōu1 jìng4 dù4 = Dragon-Boats-compete-cross-water) = Dragon Boat Race. 龜兔競走 (guī1 tu4 jìng4 zou3 = tortoise-rabbit/hare-compete-run) is Aesop’s famous hare-and-tortoise race.

by Diana Yue