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 ugly duckling

鴨
Putonghua pronunciation: ya1
Cantonese pronunciation: aap3
Meanings: duck

鴨 (radical 鳥 niao3, bird) = 鴨子 (ya1 zi0 = duck-diminutive) = duck: 公鴨 (gong1 ya1 = male-duck/drake), 母鴨 (mu3 ya1 = female-duck), 鴨蛋 (ya1 dan4 = duck-egg), 鴨絨 (ya1 rong3 = duck-down). 鴨雛 (ya1 chu1 = duck-fledgling) = 小鴨 (xiao3 ya1 = little-duck/duckling).

Gourmets love Cantonese 燒鴨 (shao1 ya1 = roast-duck), Beijing’s 烤鴨 (kao3 ya1 = roast-duck = Peking duck), 鴨肉 (ya1 rou4 = duck-meat) paté.

鴨 is 水禽 (shui3 qin2 = water-fowl). 鴨緑江 (Ya1 Lu4 Jiang1 = duck-green-river) = Yalu River, Chinese-North-Korean border. 春江水暖鴨先知 (chun1 jiang1 shui3 nuan3 ya1 xian1 zhi1 = springtime-river-water-warm-ducks-first-know) describes ducks swimming in springtime river or insiders perceiving oncoming thaw/boom ahead of others.

by Diana Yue