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 kindergartens

園 (radical □ wei2, surround) means planted/leisure area: 果園 (guo3 yüan2 = fruit-garden/orchard), 茶園 (cha2 yüan2 = tea-plantation), 動物園 (dong4 wu4 yüan2 = animal-garden/zoo), 公園 (gong1 yüan2 = public-park), 園林 (yüan2 lin2 = park’s woods/vegetation). 園丁 (yüan2 ding1 = garden-er) knows 園藝 (yüan2 yi4 = gardening-art = horticulture), designs 花園 (hua1 yüan2 = flower-gardens).

Milton’s 失樂園 (shi1 le2 yüan2 = lose-blissful-garden = Paradise Lost) describes 伊甸園 (yi1 dian4 yüan2 = “Eden”-transliterated-garden = Garden of Eden). British-French invaders burnt down Qing Emperor’s 圓明園 (Yüan2 Ming2 Yüan2 = round/perfect-clear/wise-garden = Yuan-ming Garden).

兒童園 (er2 tong2 le4 yüan2 = son/child-children-blissful-garden) means fun/browsing-corner/place for kids, 幼稚園 (you4 zhi4 yüan2 = young-small-garden) = kindergarten.

by Diana Yue