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 beginning and end

Putonghua pronunciation: tou2
Cantonese pronunciation: tau4
Meaning: head, first, leader

頭 (radical 頁 ye4, page) = head: 頭髮 (tou2 fa3 = head’s-hair), 頭痛 (tou2 teng3 = head-ache), 磚頭 (kou4 tou4 = bang-head = kow-tow). 寡頭 (gua3 tou2 = single/widow-head) means oligarch.

萬事起頭難 (wan4 shi4 qi3 tou2 nan2 = ten-thousand-things/events-start-head-difficult) = Nothing is easy at first. Graduate 從頭做起 (cong2 tou2 zuo4 qi3 = from-beginning-do-start = starts from nothing), uses 頭腦 (tou2 nao3 = head-brains), 出人頭地 (chu1 ren2 tou2 di4 = up-people’s-head-ground = distinguishes himself), builds 龍頭 (long2 tou2 = dragon’s-head = leading) enterprise.

Explorer 帶頭 (dai4 tou2 = takes-lead), crosses 山頭 (shan1 tou2 = mountain-head = peaks), discovers river’s 源頭 (yuan2 tou2 = source-beginning), makes 頭條 (tou2 tiao2 = head-lines).

by Diana Yue