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 cold snacks

Putonghua pronunciation: la1
Cantonese pronunciation: laai1
Meanings: pull, drag, tug, tow, haul, lug, draft

拉 (radical 手 = 手 shou3, hand) means pull/drag/tug. 拉開 (la1 kai1 = pull-open), 拉闊 (la1 kuo4 = pull-widen). 拉鍊 (la1 lian4 = pull-chain = zipper) 拉上 (la1 shang4 = zips-up). 拉扯 (la1 che3 = pull-tug) = arguing non-stop. 拉關係 (la1 guan1 xi4 = pull-related-string) = claim ties with influential people.

拉麵 (la1 mian4 = pull-noodles) = hand-stretched noodles, Japanese “ramen”. 拉伕 (la1 fu1 = pull/draft-men) for work/army. Volga boatmen 拉繩 (la1 qian1 = pull/tow-rope = tow boat up rapids).

Slangy term 拉 means bowels-discharge: 拉屎拉尿 (la1 shi3 la1 niao4 = discharge-faeces-discharge-urine = shit, wee). Cold/unclean food causes 腹瀉 (fu1 she4 = belly-flush) = 拉肚子 (la1 du4 z10 = pull-stomach-diminutive) = diarrhea/runny stomach.

by Diana Yue