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 quantitative easing

量 (radical 里 li3, old Chinese land measurement, c. 500 m.) means amount/quantity/measure. 份量 (fen4 liang4 = part/fraction-quantity) = weight/substance. 容量 (rong2 liang4 = contain-quantity) = volume/capacity. 食量 (shi2 liang4 = eat-quantity) = person’s food consumption quantity. However, 吞吐量 (tun1 tu4 liang4 = swallow-spit-volume) means seaport/airport’s handling capacity.

度量衡 (du4 liang4 heng2 = measure-quantity-scales) = weights-and-measures, e.g. metric system. 量化寬鬆 (liang4 hua4 kuan1 song1 = quantity-ize-broad-loosen = quantitative easing = QE) actually means 大量發債 (da4 liang4 fa1 zhai4 = big-amount-issue-debts/bonds = massive borrowing).

Sage advises against 不自量力 (bu4 zi4 liang4 li4 = no-self-measure-strength = acting beyond one’s means), advocates 量力而為 (liang4 li4 er2 wei2 = measure-strength-then-act = acting within means).

by Diana Yue