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 kitchens

热 (radical 火 = huo3, fire) means hot/heat. 冷热 (leng3 re4 = cold-hot) = temperature range. 炎热 (yan2 re4 = fiery-hot = hot) describes 熱天 (re4 tian1 = hot-sky = hot weather/days)

Athlete 熱愛 (re4 ai4 = hot-like/love = crazily loves) sports. Romeo and Juliet 熱戀 (re4 lian4 = hot-love = are passionately in love). 面紅耳熱 (mian4 hong2 er3 re4 = face-red-ears-hot) describes people arguing heatedly. Economists warn: “樓市過熱!” (lou2 shi4 guo4 re4 = “housing-market-is-over-heated!”)

Political issue 熱辣辣 (re4 la4 la4 = hot-spicy-hot-spicy-hot = gets heated). Warning: those who 怕熱 (pa4 re4 = fear/dislike the heat) should leave the kitchen. Onlookers 看熱鬧 (kan4 re4 nao4 = watch-hot-noisy = watch the fun/noise/hullabaloo).

by Diana Yue