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 the prodigal son

悔 (radical ↑ = 心, xin1 = heart) = 後悔 (hou4 hui4 = afterwards-regret = regretting something afterwards). Killer 悔恨 (hui4 hen4 = regret-hate = strongly regrets) having committed killings but 悔之已晚 (hui4 zhi1 yi3 wan3 = regret-it-already-evening = his regret came too late).

悔 also means 反悔 (fan3 hui4 = overturn-regret = retract): 悔婚 (hui4 hun1 = regret-marriage = withdraw promise to marry), 悔約 (hui4 yue4 = regret-agreement = break contract).

Prisoner 悔過 (hui4 guo4 = regret-fault/wrong = admits he has committed wrongdoings), submits 悔過書 (hui4 guo4 shu1 = regret-fault/wrong-letter = written confession). Prodigal son 悔悟 (hui4 wu4 = regret/understand = repents, achieves enlightenment), 悔改 (hui4 gai3 = regret-change = repents, reforms himself).