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 Jonah and the whale

脱
Putonghua pronunciation: tuo1
Cantonese pronunciation: tuet3
Meanings: strip, disrobe, disengage, escape

脱 has radical 月 (= 肉 rou4, flesh/meat). Strip-teaser 脱衣 (tuo1 yi1 = takes-off-clothes), 脱光 (tuo1 guang1 = strips-herself-bare). 脫口而出 (tuo1 kou3 er2 chu1 = leave-mouth-and-out) describes words exclaimed spontaneously. Owner cashes out when apartment 脫手 (tuo1 shou3 = leave-hands = is sold).

Trapped spy successfully 脫身 (tuo1 shen1 = disengage-body = escapes). Divorced woman 脫離 (tuo1 li2 = disengage-leave = is freed from) ex-husband, 脫胎換骨 (tuo1 tai1 huan4 gu3 = leave-embryo-change-bones = becomes a new person).

Prophet 約拿 (yue4 na2 = “Jonah”-transliterated) 脫險 (tuo1 xian3 = escaped-danger), preached in Nineveh. Whole city 悔改 (hui4 gai3 = regret-change = repented) to God, hoped to 脫罪 (tuo1 zui4 = escape-sin = be discharged of sin/guilt).

by Diana Yue