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 ugly duckling

鵝
Putonghua pronunciation: e2
Cantonese pronunciation: ngoh4
Meanings: goose

鵝 (radical 鳥 niao3, bird) includes 家鵝 (jia1 e3 = domesticated-goose), 雁鵝 (yan4 e2, wild-goose-goose = 雁 yan4, wild goose). 鵝蛋臉 (e2 dan3 lian3 = goose-egg-face) = girl's oval face. 鵝毛雪 (e2 mao2 xue3 = goose-feather-snow) = big/palm-sized snow-flakes.

天鵝 (tian1 e2 = heavenly-geese = swans) have serene associations. 鰹蝦蟆想吃天鵝肉 (lai4 xia1 ma0 xiang3 chi1 tian1 e2 rou4 = warty-toad-wants-to-eat-swan's-meat) describes lowly person's unrealistic fantasies. 天鵝之歌 (tian1 e2 zhi1 ge1 = swan-song) means dying/exiting person's final performance/contribution.

Plain-looking 小天鵝 (xiao3 tian1 e2 = young-swan = cygnet) is protagonist of fairytale 魚小鴨變天鵝 (chou3 xiao3 ya1 bian4 tian1 e2 = ugly-little-duck-transform-heavenly-goose = Ugly Duckling grows into Swan).

by Diana Yue