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 false hopes

渴 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) and 喝 (he1, drink, radical 口 kou3, mouth) have related shapes/sounds/meanings. When 口渴 (kou3 ke3 = mouth-thirsty), 喝水 (he1 shui3 = drink-water), because water 解渴 (jie3 ke3 = relieves-thirst). 臨渴掘井 (lin2 ke2 jüe2 jing3 = upon-thirst-dig-well) means making belated efforts to solve problem.

Man 渴慕 (ke3 mu4 = thirst/greatly-admires/adores) girl, 渴望 (ke3 wang4 = thirst/earnestly-hopes-to) date her. Company 渴求 (ke3 qiu2 = thirst/earnestly-seeks) talent. Fasting causes 饥渴 (ji1 ke3 = hunger-thirst).

Story goes: General 哄騙 (hong2 pian4 = coaxes-deceives) tired/thirsty soldiers, “Look at the plum-trees ahead! Soon you won't feel thirsty!” Hence idiom 望梅止渴 (wang4 mei2 zhi3 ke3 = look-at-plum-stop-thirst) means getting false hopes from false promises.

by Diana Yue