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 hams

腿
Putonghua pronunciation: tui3
Cantonese pronunciation: tui2
Meanings: leg

腿 comprises 大腿 (da4 tui3 = big-leg = upper leg), 小腿 (xiao3 tui3 = small-leg = lower leg), 肌肉 (ji1 rou4 = muscle-flesh = muscles), 筋骨 (jin1 gu3 = tendons-and-bones).

Four-legged animals have 前腿 (qian2 tui3 = front-legs), 後腿 (hou4 tui3 = hind-legs).

Butchers sell 雞腿 (ji1 tui3 = chicken-leg = drumsticks), 羊腿 (yang2 tui3 = sheep/lamb-leg = leg of lamb). 猪腿肉 (zhu1 tui3 rou4 = pig-leg-meat) = pork loin. 火腿 (huo3 tui3 = fire-leg) = ham.

提腿伸腰 (ti2 tui3 shen1 yao1 = lift-leg-stretch-waist), 扫堂腿 (sao3 tang2 tui3 = sweep-hall-leg = swirl one leg horizontally above ground) are Chinese kung-fu actions. 飛毛腿 (fei1 mao2 tui3 = fly-hair-legs) means extremely fast runner.

by Diana Yue