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 mahjong

章 (立 li4, stand + 早 zao3, early) means established logic/law. 章法 (zhang1 fa3 = rules-laws) = logic/organization. 文章 (wen2 zhang1 = writing-logic) = essay/article. 憲章 (xian4 zhang1 = constitution-law) = constitution/charter. Company's 章程 (zhang1 cheng2 = rules-procedures) = articles of association.

Allies 約法三章 (yue4 fa3 san1 zhang1 = agree-rule-three-chapters = sign agreement over issues). 斷章取義 (duan4 zhang1 qu3 yi4 = cut/break-chapter-take-meaning) means interpreting statement's meaning out of context.

Mahjong-players are 高章 (gao1 zhang1 = high-logic = good/smart at grasping game’s complexities) or 低章 (di1 zhang1 = low-logic = stupid). Lucky player gets 好章 (hao3 zhang1 = good-tiles that fit into a good hand), not 壞章 (huai4 zhang1 = bad-tiles that just don’t fit).

by Diana Yue