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 Olympic Games

練
Putonghua pronunciation: lian4
Cantonese pronunciation: lin6
Meanings: practice, rehearse, drill, experienced, adept

Etymologically, 練 (練 = 絲 sī1, silk + 束 jian3, select) meant raw-silk or boiling/scouring/processing of raw-silk. 練 = 練習 (lian4 xi2 = practice~study/exercise) = skills-practice. Chopin wrote 練習曲 (lian4 xi2 qū3 = practice-exercise-music.works = études) for piano. Young people need 磨練 (mo2 lian4 = grind~scour = trials) in life. Vocalist 練聲 (lian4 shēng1 = practices~voice). Bruce Lee 練武 (lian4 wu3 = practice~martial = practices martial arts).

Menaced country 秘密練兵 (mi4 mi4 lian4 bīng1 = secret-covered-practice~army = builds/trains army secretly/covertly). 教練 (jiao4 lian4 = teach~practice) = trainer/coach. Olympic team 訓練有素 (xùn4 lian4 you3 su4 = lecture~practice~has~always = receives regular/continuous training), but wounded athlete 失練 (shi1 lian4 = lose~practice = is out of practice).

by Diana Yue