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 partying

Putonghua pronunciation: *nao 4*
Cantonese pronunciation: *naau 6*
Meanings: noise, clamor, row, disturbance

鬨 = noisy: 鬨市 (*nao4 shi4* = noisy-market = busy downtown),

Bullies 鬨事 (*nao4 shi4* = clamor-action = make scenes).

Drunkards 鬨酒 (*nao4 jiu3* = clamor-liquor/wine = create drunken row).

Sulking girlfriend 鬨情緒 (*nao4 qing2 xu4* = disturbed-feeling-mood = show-off whims).


Cantonese 鬨 = Putonghua 罵 (*ma4* = reprimand/reproach/scold). “鬨醒你!” (*naau6 sing2 nei5* = scold-waken-you) means “I’m telling you off to make you understand!”

by Diana Yue