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

Putonghua pronunciation: hu2
Cantonese pronunciation: woo4
Meanings: harmony, win

Noun 和 (he2) means harmony: 和平 (he2 ping2 = harmony-level = peace), 講和 (jiang3 he2 = talk-peace = agree to stop fighting).

In mahjong, 和 (pronounced hu2) means 和牌 (hu2 pai2 = harmony-tiles), i.e. form 一手牌 (yi1 shou3 pai2 = a-hand-of-tiles) with correct tile-combinations, so 和出了 (hu2 chu1 le0 = wins-out-ed = win this game!)

和 (hu2 = win game) is miswritten as 糊 (hu2 = gruel), hence 食糊 (shi2 hu2 = eat-gruel) also means win game. 雞糊 (ji1 hu2 = chicken-gruel) is smallest win. Stakes escalate with 一番 (yi1 fan1 = first-level-stakes), 二番 (er2 fan1 = second-level-stakes), 三番 (san1 fan1 = third-level-stakes), more complex tile-combinations. 滿糊 (man3 hu2 = full/overflowing-gruel) is win yielding highest stakes.

by Diana Yue