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: san 4
Cantonese pronunciation: saan 3
Meanings: disperse


散局 (san4 ju2 = disperse-gathering/game) means party’s break-up or “Game’s over!” 酒阑人散 (jiu3 lan2 ren2 san4 = wine/banquet/party-finished-people-leave) arouses sad/empty feeling. Trips help us 散心 (san4 xin1 = loosen/free-heart = take mind off melancholy/worries).

Friends fix date, promise “不見不散!” (no-see-no-go-away = “Will definitely turn up!”) After robbery, criminals “散水” (Cantonese san3 sui2 = disperse-water = scram/skip town).

by Diana Yue