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 hams

乾
Putonghua pronunciation: gan1
Cantonese pronunciation: gon1
Meanings: dry, dehydrated, make dry

乾 means dehydrated. 餅乾 (bing3 gan1 = cake-dried = biscuits), 牛肉乾 (niu2 rou4 gan1 = cow-meat-dried = beef jerky) are 乾糧 (gan1 liang2 = dehydrated-foods). Intercepted streams are 乾涸 (gan4 he2 = dry-dried-up). Un-watered plants are 乾枯 (gan1 ku1 = dried-up-wilted).

Clothes are washed 乾淨 (gan1 jing4 = dry-pure = clean), 曬乾 (shai4 gan1 = sun-dried). 臘腸 (ia4 chang2 = cured-sausages), 臘鴨 (ia4 ya1 = cured-duck) are 風乾 (feng1 gan1 = wind-dried) winter delicacies.

Diners enjoy Spanish 風乾火腿 (feng1 gan1 huo3 tui3 = wind-dried-fire-leg = cured ham), say “乾杯!” (gan1 bei1 = dry-cup = “Bottoms up!”) Worries are forgotten 一乾二淨 (yi1 gan1 er4 jing4 = one-dry-two-pure = thoroughly).

by Diana Yue