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 walls**

隔 (ge 2)

Cantonese pronunciation: gaak 3

Meanings: separate, isolate

隔 = separate: 分隔 (fen1 ge2 = part-separate) sheep from goats, 隔離 (ge2 li2 = separate~leave = isolate) virus-carriers. Next-doors is 隔壁 (ge4 bi2 = separated-by-wall) or Cantonese 隔籬 (gaak3 lei4 = separated-by-bamboo-fence). Prison-walls 隔絕 (ge2 jue2 = separated~entirely~from) prisoners from world. Raincoats 隔水 (ge2 shui3 = shuts-out-water). Vacuums 隔熱 (ge2 re1 = insulate~heat). Recording studios have 隔聲設備 (ge2 sheng1 she4 bi4 = separate~sound~install~prepare = sound-proof facilities). Estranged acquaintances feel 隔膜 (ge2 mo4 = separate~membrane = uneasy/unfamiliar), but 橫隔膜 (heng2 ge2 mo4 = horizontal-separate~membrane) means the diaphragm.

隔山買牛 (ge2 shan1 mai3 niu2 = separated-by-hill~buy~ox) means buying/investing blindly. 隔岸觀火 (ge2 an4 guan1 huo3 = across-shore~watch~fire) means coolly watching others' calamity unfold.

by Diana Yue