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 grasslands**

草 (cao 3)
Cantonese pronunciation: cho 2
Meanings: grass, herb

草 = grass: 青草 (qing1 cao3 = green-grass), 草叢 (cao3 cong2 = grass-clusters), 草地 (cao3 di4 = grass-land = meadow/lawn), 野草 (ye2 cao3 = wild-grass = weeds). 稻草人 (dao4 cao3 ren2 = padi-stem-grass-person = hay human figure) = scarecrow.

Animals graze on 草原 (cao3 yuan2 = grassy-plain). Nomads 逐水草而居 (zhu2 shui2 cao3 er2 ju1 = chase/follow-water-grass-and-live/stay = move around to where water and grass are plentiful). Observers watch for 風吹草動 (feng1 chui1 cao3 dong4 = wind-blow-grass-move = signs of disturbance/action).

Poor peasants wear 草鞋 (cao3 xie2 = grass/straw-shoe = straw sandals). 草根階層 (cao3 gen1 jie1 ceng2 = grass-roots-tier-level) means grassroots/lower classes. 草包 (cao3 bao1 = grass-bag/bun) means illiterate/ignorant person.

by Diana Yue