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 the fiscal cliff

Putonghua pronunciation: xüan2
Cantonese pronunciation: yuen4
Meanings: hang, hanging, suspended

懸 (radical 系 xi4, silk/bind) means hang/suspend. Painting 懸掛 (xüan2 gua4 = is-suspended-hung) on wall. Police 懸賞 (xüan2 xiang3 = hangs/offers-reward) to catch criminal. Air contains 懸浮粒子 (xüan2 fu2 li1 zi3 = hang-float-grain-diminutive = suspended particles).

Preacher 口若懸河 (kou3 ruo4 xüan2 he2 = mouth-resembles-hanging-river = babbles non-stop), calls delinquents/sinners to 臨崖勒馬 (jin2 ya2 le4 ma3 = reach-cliff-pull-back/constrict-horse = halt/hold back).

Rich and poor have 懸殊 (xüan2 shu1 = hang-differ = hugely differently) assets. Facing 財政懸崖 (cai2 zheng4 xüan2 ya2 = money-administration-hanging-cliff = fiscal cliff), people have 懸念 (xüan2 nian4 = hanging-idea = unanswered query/curiosity/concern): Why is budget package 懸而不決 (xüan2 er2 bu4 jüe2 = hang-and-no-decide = hanging in mid-air, undecided)?

by Diana Yue