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 Chief Executive Election

Putonghua pronunciation: dou4
Cantonese pronunciation: dau3
Meanings: compete, fight, struggle against, persecute

Ideogram 鬥 (left-right opposing axes) indicates antagonism: 跑嘴 (dou4 zui3 = fight-mouth = argue/quarrel), 鬥快 (dou4 kuai4 = fight-fast = see who’s faster), 戰鬥 (zhan4 dou4 = war-compete = battle), 決鬥 (jie2 dou4 = determined/decisive-fight = duel). Marxists’ 階級鬥爭 (jie1 ji2 dou4 zheng1 = platform-tier-compete-fight) = class struggle.

鬥牛勇士 (dou4 niu2 yong3 shi4 = fight-cow/bull-brave-man) = bullfighter/matador. 鬥敗的公雞 (dou4 bai4 de0 gong1 ji1 = fight-defeated-'s-male-chicken = defeated cock) describes loser’s depressed look.

HKSAR’s Chief Executive election was 龍爭虎鬥 (long2 zheng1 hu3 dou4 = dragons-compete-tigers-fight = battle of strong guys). Candidates 鬥智 (dou4 zhi4 = compete-intelligence = fought with brains), 鬥狠 (dou4 hen3 = compete-fierce = fought to see who’s fiercer/nastier).

by Diana Yue