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 Hurricane Sandy

Putonghua pronunciation: jù4
Cantonese pronunciation: gui6
Meanings: huge, giant, enormous, extremely large, great

巨 = 巨大 (jù4 da4 = huge/gigantic-big); 巨型 (jù4 xing2 = enormous-size); 巨量 (jù4 liang4 = huge-bulk); 巨款 (jù4 kuan3 = huge-money) = huge amount of money. Myth features 巨人 (jù4 ren2 = huge-person = giant), 巨龍 (jù4 long2 = giant-dragon).

巨商 (jù4 shang1 = giant-businessman) = super-tycoon. 巨富 (jù4 fu4 = super-rich) = billionaire. Tolstoy, 巨匠 (jù4 jiang4 = great-master) of literature, wrote巨著 (jù4 zhu4 = great-work) War and Peace.

巨風 (jù4 feng1 = huge-winds/gales), 巨浪 (jù4 lang4 = giant-waves) hit New York shoreline. 巨石 (jù4 shi2 = huge-rocks/boulders) crash with 巨響 (jù4 xiang3 = huge-noise). 巨變 (jù4 bian4 = great-change/catastrophe) generates 艱巨 (jian1 jù4 = difficult-gigantic) task of rebuilding.

by Diana Yue