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 zis 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

挽 [wan3]
Putonghua pronunciation: wan3
Cantonese pronunciation: waan5
Meanings: hold, clutch, fetch, bring

挽 (radical 手 = hand shou3, hand) = clutch-hold action. Fireman 挽起 (wan3 qi3 = takes up) bucket, 挽水 (wan3 shui3 = take-up-water = carries/transports water) to quench fire. Archer 挽弓 (wan3 gong1 = takes-bow), shoots deer. Lovers 挽手 (shou3 wan3 shou3 = take-hand = hold each other’s hand).

When bubble bursts, government tries to 挽救 (wan3 jiu4 = pull-back-save = save/redeem) situation. Best economists get 挽留 (wan3 liu2 = pull-hold-remain = invited/begged to stay on) to 力挽狂澜 (li4 wan3 kuang2 lan2 = strong-pull-mad-tide = fight oncoming big crash), 挽回 (wan3 hui2 = pull-back = redeem) losses.

Praying for dead souls to return, mourners sing 挽歌 (wan3 ge1 = beg-return-song) i.e. 鞠歌 (wan3 ge1 = mourning-elegy/dirge).

by Diana Yue