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 fish

鱼
Putonghua pronunciation: yu2
Cantonese pronunciation: yue4
Meanings: fish

鱼 is radical in 鱼 (yu2, cod), 鱼 (lu2, bass), 鱼 (man4, eel), 鱼 (jing1, whale), 鱼 (xun2, sturgeon) etc. 鱼类 (yu2 lei4 = fish-species) = all fish. Verb 漁 (yu2, water + 鱼) means fishing. 釣魚 (diao4 yu2 = dangle-line-hook-fish) = angling.


Trawlers catch 金槍魚 (jin1 qiang1 yu2 = gold-spear-fish = tuna). Drowned swimmer 葬身魚腹 (zang4 shen1 yu2 fu1 = bury-body-in-fish’s-stomach = is eaten by fish). 大魚吃小魚 (da4 yu2 chi1 xiao3 yu2 = big-fish-eat-small-fish) is law of nature and business world.

by Diana Yue