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 group tours

點 (radical 火 = fire huo3, fire) as verb means 點頭 (dian3 tou2 = dot-head = nod/approve), 點數 (dian3 shu4 = count-numbers), 點名 (dian3 ming2 = point-name = roll-call/nominate), 點火 (dian3 huo3 = ignite-fire), 點化 (dian3 hua4 = touch-transform = enlighten).

Noun 點 means drop.point/jot/iota: 起點 (qi3 dian3 = starting-point), 賣點 (mai4 dian3 = selling-point), 冰點 (bing1 dian3 = ice/freezing-point). 點滴 (dian3 di1 = dot-drop) means small bits or intravenous drip.

Harbor 點綴 (dian3 zhui4 = dotted-attached = dotted/decorated) with sails is 旅遊點 (lü3 you2 dian3 = travel-leisurely-roam-point = tourist spot). 雨點 (yü3 dian3 = rain-drops) fall, tourists 有點冷 (you3 dian3 leng3 = are/feel-a-bit-cold), eat 點心 (dian3 xin1 = bit-of-heart = small delicacies/dim-sum).

by Diana Yue