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 heroes

Putonghua pronunciation: yong3
Cantonese pronunciation: yung5
Meaning: brave, valiant, daring, fierce, ferocious, courageous

勇 (radical 力 li4, strength/force) involves 體力 (ti3 li4 = body-strength), 勇氣 (yong3 qi4 = brave-energy = daring/courage/valour). 勇士 (yong3 shi4 = brave-men/warrior) is 勇敢 (yong3 gan3 = bold-and-daring), 勇猛 (yong3 meng3 = bold-and-ferocious), 勇冠三軍 (yong3 guan4 san1 jun1 = brave-top-three-armies) describes peerless knight/fighter.

Priest tells confessor: 勇於認錯 (yong3 yu1 ren4 cuo4 = bravely-admit-mistakes), 敲起勇敢 (gu3 qi3 yong3 qi4 = drum-up-brave-energy = muster up your courage), 勇往直前 (yong3 wang3 zhi2 qian2 = bravely-charge/forge-ahead).

智勇雙全 (zhi4 yong3 shuang1 quan2 = wise/clever-and-bold—both-complete = smart, daring) guy beats 蠻勇 (man2 yong3 = barbarically/headstrong-fierce) rival who 有勇無謀 (you3 yong3 wu2 mou2 = has-bravery-has-no-plot = can fight but can't think/strategize).

by Diana Yue