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 housing

Putonghua pronunciation: di4
Cantonese pronunciation: dei6
Meanings: land

地 (radical 土 tu3, earth) = 土地 (tu3 di4 = earth/soil-land): 地球 (di4 qiu2 = land-ball = planet Earth), 地上 (di4 shang4 = land-above = on land/ground/floor), 地方 (di4 fang1 = land-square = area/place/premises).


by Diana Yue