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 Han people

語 (radical 言 yan2, word) means 語言 (yǔ3 yan2, speech-words = 語文 yǔ3 wen2, speech-writing-script = language), having 語音 (yǔ3 yīn1 = speech-sounds), 語法 (yǔ3 fǎ3 = language-rules = grammar), 語意 (yǔ3 yì4 = linguistic-meaning).

China has many 地方語言 (di4 fāng1 yǔ3 yan2 = land-region-language = 方言 fāng1 yan2 = regional-dialects), but 共同語 (gòng4 tóng2 yǔ3 = shared-same-language = common language = lingua franca) is 漢語 (Hán4 yǔ3 = Han-language, i.e. Chinese) using 漢字 (Hán4 zì4 = Han-Chinese-characters) as writing script.

Universities teach 古代漢語 (gǔ3 dài4 Hán4 yǔ3 = ancient-times-Han-language = classical Chinese), 現代漢語 (xiàn4 dài4 Hán4 yǔ3 = present-times-Han-language = modern Chinese), 外語 (wài4 yǔ3 = foreign-languages).

by Diana Yue