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 World Cup matches

勝
Putonghua pronunciation: sheng4
Cantonese pronunciation: sing3
Meanings: win, conquer, victory

勝 = 嬴 (ying2, win/defeat) = 勝利 (sheng4 li4 = win-advantage = victory): 大勝 (da4 sheng4 = big-win = landslide victory), 僅勝 (jin3 sheng4 = just/narrow-win = marginal victory), 慘勝 (can3 sheng4 = tragic-win = bitter victory).

不分勝負 (bu4 fen1 sheng4 fu4 = no-distinguish-win- lose) describes a tied match. Weak team 戰勝 (zhan4 sheng4 = fight-win = beats/defeats) strong team is 爆冷門 (bao4 leng3 men2 = burst-cold-door = unforeseeable/undeductible outcome). Adult defeating kid is 勝之不武 (sheng4 zhi1 bu2 wu3 = win-it-not-martial = unfair/un-chivalrous victory).

Brazil 勝算在握 (sheng4 suan4 zai4 wo1 = win-estimation-in-grasp = is sure about winning), 旗開得勝 (qi2 kai1 de2 sheng4 = flag-unfurl-obtain-victory = easily wins first battle/match).

by Diana Yue