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 cycling

踏 (radical 足 zu2, foot) = step/tread: 踏板 (ta4 ban3 = treading-plank), 踏踏 (qian2 ta4 = trample-tread), 踏雪 (ta4 xue3 = treading/walking-on snow). Explorer 踏足 (ta4 zu2 = tread-foot = sets foot on) virgin island. 踏入中年 (ta4 ru4 zhong1 nian2 = step-into-middle-year) = entering middle-age.

腳踏實地 (jiao3 ta4 shi2 di4 = feet-step-on-solid-ground) = 踏實 (ta4 shi2 = step-on-solid) describes hardworking/no-fancy person. 原地踏步 (yuan2 di4 ta4 bu4 = original-ground-tread-steps) describes plans going nowhere. 一腳踏兩船 (yi1 jiao3 ta4 liang3 chuan2 = one-foot-tread-two-boats) means dividing loyalty between two camps.

腳踏車 (jiao3 ta4 che1 = feet-tread-cart/car), 自行車 (zi4 xing2 che1 = self-walk/move-cart/car), 單車 (dan1 che1 = single-cart/car) all mean bicycle/bike.

by Diana Yue