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 diplomatic relations

助 (radical 力 li4, strength) = 幫助 (bang1 zhu4 = gang/assist-help = help). 助手 (zhu4 shou3 = help-hand) = 助理 (zhu4 li3 = help-manage) = assistant. Team enlists veteran to 助陣 (zhu4 zhen4 = help-military-formation = strengthen own side).

自助 (zi4 zhu4 = self-help) = self-service, 自助餐 (zi4 zhu4 can1 = self-help-meal) = buffet. Idiom 拔苗助長 (ba2 miao2 zhu4 zhang3 = pull-young-shoot-help-grow) means prematurely helping budding protégée, thus ruining him/her.

Bankrupt state feels 無助 (wu2 zhu4 = without-help = helpless), asks for 經濟援助 (jing1 ji4 yu2n2 zhu4 = manage-irrigate-list/assisting-helping = economic aid). Sage disagrees: "天助自助者 (tian1 zhu4 zi4 zhu4 zhe3 = sky/heaven-help-self-help-person = Heaven help those who help themselves!"

by Diana Yue