The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi 子, 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 winter clothes

送 送 has radical 走 (zou3, walk/go). Postman 送信 (song4 xin4 = delivers-letters). Housewife 送出 (song4 chu1 = gives-away) old winter clothes. Philanthropist 贈送 (zeng4 song4 = donates- gives) supplies to earthquake victims.

Shop promotes 買一送一 (mai3 yi1 song4 yi1 = buy-one-give-one = “buy one get one”). 送禮 (song4 li3 = deliver-rite/present) = offer gifts/bribes. New Year bells 送舊迎新 (song4 jiu4 ying2 xin1 = usher-out-old-welcome-new = ring out the old ring in the new).

Drug addict 斷送前途 (duan4 song4 qian2 tu2 = cut-off-yield-front-road = ruins his own future). 送上门 (song4 shang4 men2 = deliver-up-to-door) describes hotel’s room-service or stupid-naive prey walking into predator’s trap/arms. 送死 (song4 si3 = deliver-die) = take suicidal action/move.

by Diana Yue