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 fish

Putonghua pronunciation: you2
Cantonese pronunciation: yuk6
Meanings: swim, move, shift, drift

游 (radical 氵, water) means 游泳 (you2 yong3 = swim-dive) = swim. 游魚 (you2 yu2 = swimming-fish) eat 浮游生物 (fu2 you2 sheng1 wu4 = float-swim-living-things = plankton). Warships 游弋 (you2 yi4 = swim-shoot/speed = prowl/cruise) around disputed islands.

游牧民族 (you2 mu4 min2 zu2 = roam-herd-people-tribe) = nomadic tribe. 游擊隊 (you2 ji1 dui4 = move-hit-team) = guerrillas. 游資 (you2 zi1 = floating-capital) disturbs market. Liar’s 游移 (you2 yi2 = drifting-shifting) glance betrays his dishonesty.

上游 (shang4 you2 = up-stream), 中游 (zhong1 you2 = mid-stream), 下游 (xia4 you2 = down-stream) mean river's sections or industry's different production stages. 力爭上游 (li4 zheng1 shang4 you2 = effort-compete-up-stream) describes person striving for higher status/achievements.

by Diana Yue