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

足 足 = 腳 (jiao3, foot). 手足 (shou3 zu2 = hand-foot) also means brothers/buddies. In 1911 China banned 纏足 (chan2 zu2 = bind-foot = foot-binding). Today women have 天足 (tian1 zu2 = nature-born-feet = unbound feet), not 小腳 (xiao2 jiao3 = small-feet = bound feet).

足球隊 (zu2 qiu2 dui4 = foot-ball-team)’s 教練 (jiao4 lian4 = teach-practice = coach) trains 球員 (qiu2 yuan2 = ball-member = players) to 踢球 (ti1 qiu2 = kick/control-ball): 傳 (chuan2, pass-ball), 盤 (pan2, revolve-ball = tackle), 頂 (ding3, top/head-ball = do headers), 射 (she4, shoot), 射十二碼 (she4 shi2 er4 ma3 = shoot-ten-two=12-yards = shoot penalty kick).

Pele, Maradona are 足球明星 (zu2 qiu2 ming2 xing1 = foot-ball-bright-star = soccer stars).

by Diana Yue