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 O.

This week: Words about first-home purchases

比 (showing two 比 bi4, spoon-feed) means 比較 (bi3 jiao4 = compare-compete), 對比 (dui4 bi3 = match/contrast-compare).

百份比 (bai2 fen4 bi3 = hundred-parts-compare = percentage) is 比例 (bi3 li4 = comparative-ratio). 比賽 (bi3 sai4 = compare-compete) = competition/race.

Speculators watch commodities' 比價 (bi3 jia4 = comparative-prices). Gold 比不上 (bi3 bu4 shang4 = compare-not-up = can't compare with) platinum, gets 比下去 (bi3 xia4 qü4 = compare-down-go = lower/inferior by comparison).

比喻 (bi3 yü4 = comparison-metaphor) likens 500-sq.ft. apartments to 蜗居 (wu1 jü1 = snail's/tiny-abode). Still, 比上不足, 比下有餘 (bi3 shang4 bu4 zu2, bi3 xia4 you3 yü2 = compared-to-top-not-enough, compared-to-bottom-has-extra = it's not the best, but it's better than the worst!

by Diana Yue