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 job-hunting

位
Putonghua pronunciation: wei4
Cantonese pronunciation: wai2
Meanings: position, seat

位 (位 = 人 ren2, person + 立 li4, stand) means seat/position: 座位 (zuo4 wei4 = chair-seat), 位子 (wei4 zi0 = seat-diminutive), 空位 (kong1 wei4 = empty-seat/post), 換位 (huan4 wei4 = change/swap-seats/positions).

Driver finds building’s 方位 (fang1 wei4 = facing-direction-position) by 全球定位系統 (quan2 qiu2 ding4 wei4 xi4 tong3 = entire globe-determine-position-link-system = Global Positioning System = GPS).

Graduate fills 位置 (wei4 zhi4 = seat-position) in firm, but 不安於位 (bu4 an1 yu1 wei4 = not-contented-on-seat/position = is restless/ambitious, wants change), believes another firm 虚位以待 (xu1 wei4 yi3 dai4 = vacate-seat/position-to-wait-for = is keeping a position open for him). 位高勢危 (wei4 gao1 shi4 wei1 = position-high-situation-insecure) describes ruler anytime toppled/removed.

by Diana Yue