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 \ 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 cycling

Putonghua pronunciation: piao1
Cantonese pronunciation: piu1
Meanings: wind blowing, float in air, fly in air

飄 has radical 風 (feng1, wind). Kite 飄上 (piao1 shang4 = floats/flies-up), 飄下 (piao1 xia4 = floats/flies-down). Fragrance 飄來 (piao1 lai2 = float-come = whiffs by), 飄過 (piao1 guo4 = floats/whiffs-past). Autumn leaves 飄落 (piao1 luo4 = float-descend). 飄 (piao1 = blown by wind) is Chinese title of novel Gone With The Wind.

Secret agent 行蹤飄忽 (xing2 zong1 piao1 hu1 = walk-track-float-sudden/dim/remote = moves unnoticeably/unpredictably). 花果飄零 (hua1 guo3 piao1 ling2 = flower-fruit-float-reduced) laments uprooted cultural heritage disintegrating/vanishing.

Cyclist 騎車 (qi2 che1 = ride-cart/car = rides bicycle), 飄然而去 (piao1 ran2 er2 qu4 = float-adjectival-and-away = goes away like a whiff of gentle wind), enjoys 飄逸 (piao1 yi4 = float-detached = detached/carefree) feeling.

by Diana Yue