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 contracts

限
Putonghua pronunciation: xian4
Cantonese pronunciation: haan6
Meaning: limit, restrict, prescribe; limit, norm, quota, separate, cut off

限 (radical 阝 = 阜 fu4, hill) means 限制 (xian4 zhi4 = limit-control = imposing limits). Parents 限定 (xian4 ding4 = limit-determine) kids’ bedtime, won’t 宽限 (kuan1 xian4 = relax-limit). School sets 限额 (xian4 e2 = limiting-amounng = quota) on intake. Frozen foods have 期限 (qi1 xian4 = time-period-limit = deadline for consumption).

有限公司 (you3 xian4 gong1 si1 = has-limit-public-bureau = limited company) defines directors’ 權限 (qüan2 xian4 = powers-and-limitations). Bonuses have 上限 (shang4 xian4 = upper-most-limit). Employees’ wages have 下限 (xia4 xian4 = lowest-limit), cannot exceed 極限 (ji3 xian4 = ultimate-limit).

Prodigy has 無限 (wu2 xian4 = un-limited, infinite) talent/imagination, future 無可限量 (wu2 ke3 xian4 liang4 = no-can-limit-volume = has immense prospects).

by Diana Yue