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 New Year resolutions

破
Putonghua pronunciation: po4
Cantonese pronunciation: po4
Meanings: break, defeat

破 (石 shi2, stone + 皮 pi2, skin) = scratch/break/broken: 破舊 (po4 jiu4 = broken/torn-old) clothes/furniture, 破碎 (po4 sui4 = broken-cracked) marriage/heart. Warmongers 破壞 (po4 huai4 = break-ruin) peace. Once rich 破落戶 (po4 luo4 hu4 = broken-down-household = fallen family) now 撿破爛 (jian3 po4 lan4 = pick-broken-torn = collect rubbish/castaways).

Friendship 破裂 (po4 lie4 = break-crack = breaks down), friends 抓破臉 (zhuai po4 lian3 = scratch-break-countenance = drop pretense, attack each other), 破口大罵 (po4 kou3 da4 ma4 = break-mouth-big-rebuke = shout abuses).

老牛破車 (lao3 niu2 po4 che1 = old-ox-broken-cart) describes old China’s poverty/backwardness. Reformers advocate 破除 (po4 chu2 = break-expel) superstitions, 打破 (da3 po4 = beat-break = crush) traditions.

by Diana Yue