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 accidents

(radical 貝 bei2 = seashell = money)
Putonghua pronunciation: pei 2
Cantonese pronunciation: pooi 4
Meanings: repay, reimburse

賠 means offer money/apologies for offence committed. 賠禮 (pei2 li3 = repay-obesiance) = bow penitently. “向你賠不是!” (xiang4 ni3 pei2 bu4 shi4 = to-you-repay-not-right) means “Sorry, I was wrong!” 賠不起錢 (pei2 bu4 qi3 qian2 = repay-not-up-money) means cannot afford amount of reparation/compensation demanded.

買保險 (mai3 bao2 xian3 = buy-protect-danger/risk) = buy insurance. 旅行保險 (lu3 xing2 bao2 xian3 = travel-walk-insurance = travel insurance) buyers who suffered 損失 (sun3 shi1 = hurt-loss = losses) receive 賠償 (pei2 chang2 = repay-reimbursement = damages).

Unsuccessful businessmen 賠本 (pei2 ben3 = repay-principal/capital = lose investment capital). China paid 庚子賠款 (Geng1 Zi3 pei2 kuan3 = Geng-zí-year-repay-money = Boxer Uprising Indemnity) to foreign invaders in 1901.

by Diana Yue