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

外
Putonghua pronunciation: wai4
Cantonese pronunciation: ngoi6
Meaning: external, outside, over, beyond, foreign

外 (xi2, evening + 卜 bu3, foretune-telling, i.e. fore-casting far-off events) means un-related to here/self: 外面 (wai4 mian4 = out-side of building/border), 外表 (wai4 mbiao3 = outside-surface = person/thing's appearance). Financial hub welcomes 外商 (wai4 shang1 = foreign-merchants/businesses) from 外地 (wai4 di4 = other-places), 外國 (wai4 guo2 = foreign-countries) to bring 外資 (wai4 zil = foreign-capital/investments).

States having normal 外交 (wai4 jiao1 = foreign-friendship = diplomacy/diplomatic relations) do not 排外 (pai2 wai4 = ward/fend-off-outsiders = reject/discriminate against foreigners).

Husband 駕車外出 (jia4 che1 wai4 chu1 = drive-car-outside-go-out = leaves home in car). Wife yells: “Take your 外衣 (wai4 yi1 = outside-clothes = overcoat/jacket),” avoid 意外 (yi4 wai4 = intention-outside/beyond = unintended/unpredictable happening = accidents)!

by Diana Yue