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 removing obstacles

Putonghua pronunciation: jüe2
Cantonese pronunciation: juet3
Meaning: extinguish, cut, sever, end, ultimate, extreme, finest, perfect, final

絕 (radical 系 = 絲 si1, silk/thread) means cut/sever/extinguish: 斷絕 (duan4 jüe2 = cut-off), 氣絕 (qi4 jüe2 = breathing-ceases), 絕路 (jüe2 lu4 = dead-end-road), 絕緣體 (jüe2 yün2 ti3 = non-conducting-body/insulator).

絕對 (jüe2 dui4 = ultimate-facing) = absolute: 絕技 (jüe2 ji4 = fine/incomparable-skill), 絕色 (jüe2 se1 = best-color = most beautiful woman), 絕配 (jüe2 pei4 = perfect match), 絕密 (jüe2 mi4 = top-secret). 絕唱 (jüe2 chang4 = finest/final-song) means beautiful singing or inimitable performance of deceased diva.

絕望 (jüe2 wang4 = end-hope = despairing) wife 絕食 (jüe2 shi2 = abandons-eating), 絕不 (jüe2 bu4 = absolutely-won't) forgive 絕情 (jüe2 qing2 = sever-love = heartless) husband. Tribes get 滅絕 (mie4 jüe2 = extinguished-completely) in genocide.

by Diana Yue