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 lovers

伴
Putonghua pronunciation: ban4
Cantonese pronunciation: boon6
Meanings: accompany, companion, partner

Character 伴 = 人 (ren2, person) + 半 (ban4, half), i.e. “the other half”. Kids need 玩伴 (wan2 ban4 = play~companion = playmates). Girl invites 男伴 (nan2 ban4 = man/boy-companion = escort/beau), man invites 女伴 (nu3 ban4 = woman/girl-partner) to ball-dance.

Patient appreciates visitor’s 陪伴 (pei2 ban4 = accompany~companion = keeping company). Loner rejects 同伴 (tong2 ban4 = together~accompany = companion). Pianist 伴奏 (ban4 zou4 = accompany~perform = plays accompaniment) for vocalist/instrumentalist. 伙伴 (huo3 ban4 = fellow-companion) means collaborating partners/buddies.

伴侣 (ban4 lu3 = companion~mate) = mate in sexual/romantic/marital relationship. Wife is husband’s 終生伴侶 (zhong1 shen1 ban4 lu3 = lasting-life-companion~mate = lifelong partners), 老伴 (lao3 ban4 = old-companion = companion in old age).

by Diana Yue