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 1949 Liberation

Putonghua pronunciation: jie3
Cantonese pronunciation: gaai6
Meanings: link, untie, separate, solve, break, dissect, free, relieve

解 means link/untie/break-up: 解謎 (jie3 mi2 = break/solve-puzzle/mystery), 解碼 (jie3 ma3 = break/de-code), 溶解 (rong2 jie3 = melt-dissolve). Gang 解體 (jie3 ti3 = break-up-body = disbands). Policeman 押解 (ya1 jie3 = imprison-escort = escorts) convict. Boss 解聘 (jie3 ping4 = dismiss-employ = sacks) employee. 解剖學 (jie3 pou1 xue2 = dissect-open-study) = anatomy.

Dumb student 大惑不解 (da4 huo4 bu4 jie3 = big-delusion-not-understand = is greatly puzzled). Teacher 解釋 (jie3 shi1 = solve-release = explains): “了解 (liao3 jie3 = know-link = understand) problem, then 解決 (jie3 jue2 = untie-decide = solve) it.”

Opponents 解除武装 (jie3 chu2 wu3 zhuang1 = untie-take-off-military-outfit/gear = are disarmed). China celebrates 解放 (jie3 fang4 = un-bound-free = Liberation).

by Diana Yue