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 reunion gatherings

Putonghua pronunciation: ren4
Cantonese pronunciation: ying6
Meanings: know, identify, recognize, acknowledge, accept

認 (radical 言 yan2, words) = 認識 (ren4 shi1 = identify-know = know/understand). Drivers must 認路 (ren4 lu4 = identify-road = know the way). Kids learn to 認字 (ren4 zi4 = identify/recognize-characters/words). Witness examines suspects to 認人 (ren4 ren2 = identify-person = identify the culprit).

Beaten candidate 認輸 (ren4 shu4 = admits-defeat), 承認 (cheng2 ren4 = accept-admit) opponent’s superiority. Embezzler stole money but 不認賬 (bu4 ren4 zhang4 = no-admit-accounts = won’t admit it). Traitor 認賊作父 (ren4 zei2 zuo4 fu4 = acknowledge-thief/villain-as-father = accepts/serves villain as lord/protector).

Lonely guy wants to 認識朋友 (ren4 shi1 peng2 you3 = identify-know-peer-friend = know people, make friends). Estranged friends finally 相認 (xiang1 ren4 = mutual-identify = recognize/claim each other).

by Diana Yue