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 marriage

婚
Putonghua pronunciation: hun1
Cantonese pronunciation: fan1
Meanings: marry, marriage

結婚 (jie2 hun1 = tie-knot-marriage = marriage) is 人生大事 (ren2 sheng1 da4 shi4 = human-life-big-thing = important issue/event in life).

At 婚禮 (hun1 li3 = marriage-ceremony = wedding) 新郎 (xin1 lang2 = new-man = groom), 新娘 (xin1 niang2 = new-woman = bride) sign 婚約 (hun1 yue4 = marriage-covenant), exchange 結婚指環 (jie2 hun1 zhi3 huan2 = tie-knot-marriage-finger-ring = wedding rings/bands).

Feudal China practiced 盲婚 (mang2 hun1 = blind-marriage = arranged marriages). Modern couples 訂婚 (ding4 hun1 = book-marriage = get engaged), sign 婚前協議 (hun1 qian2 xie2 yi3 = marriage-before-agree-discuss = prenuptial agreements), but few 婚姻 (hun1 yin1 = marriage-link = marriages) last till 金婚 (jin1 hun1 = gold-marriage = gold wedding) anniversary.

by Diana Yue