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

Putonghua pronunciation: ou3
Cantonese pronunciation: ngau5
Meanings: even, pair, companion, mate, random, doll

偶 has multiple related meanings: 人偶 (ren2 ou3 = human-doll/figurine), 木偶 (mu4 ou3 = wooden-doll/puppet), 偶像 (ou3 xiang4 = doll-image = idol), 偶數 (ou3 shu4 = even-number, opposite of 奇數 qi2 shu4 = odd-number). Hence 配偶 (pei4 ou3 = matching/pair-figurine) means husband/wife’s other half.

無獨有偶 (wu2 du2 you2 ou3 = not-single-has-pair) describes surprisingly alike people/situations. 偶然 (ou3 ran2 = coincidental-ly) describes coincidental/chance occurrences. Bachelor 求偶 (qiu2 ou3 = beg seek-mate = goes wife-hunting). Romance may develop from 偶遇 (ou3 yu4 = random-encounter).

佳偶天成 (jia1 ou3 tian1 cheng2 = good/beautiful-mates-heaven-complete) describes perfectly matched bride-and-groom. 怨偶 (yuan4 ou3 = remorse/blame-mates) = mutually-intolerant, incompatible couple. 喪偶 (sang4 ou3 = die/lose-mate) describes husband/wife whose spouse dies.

by Diana Yue