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

縁 = 緣故 (yuan2 gu4 = derive/link-reason = cause). Buddhism explains all phenomena as 緣: 因緣 (yin1 yuan2 = reason-derivation/link = causal relationships). If people 有緣 (you3 yuan2 = have-link = 有緣分 = you3 yuan2 fen4 = have-destined-share = are destined to be linked), they meet, become friends/lovers. 姻縁 (yin1 yuan2 = marriage-derivation-link) means man links with, marries woman.

天賜良緣 (tian1 chi4 liang2 yuan2 = heaven-bestow-good-link) = heaven-sent match. 緣盡 (yuan2 jin4 = link-exhaust) = end/severing of emotional relationship. 無緣 (wu2 yuan2 = has-no-derivation = not fated to) describes people who just don't happen to meet/develop further.

Success requires 機縁 (ji1 yuan2 = chance-fated-link = opportunities). 絕緣體 (jue2 yuan2 ti3 = end-link-body) = insulator.

by Diana Yue