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 arithmetics

putsonghua pronunciation: chu2
Cantonese pronunciation: chui4
Meaning: divide, remove, eliminate, not counting, unless

除 (cradical = fu4, left-ear radical) means remove/unless/divide. Detergent 除蟲 (chu2 chong2 = removes- bugs). King 免除 (mian3 chu2 = dismisses-removes) minister’s title/duties. Lovers’ dialogue: “除非 (chu2 fei1 = count-not = unless) you swear, I won’t believe you.” “I swear there’s nobody 除了 (chu2 le0 = not-counting = except) you.”

除法 (chu2 fa3 = division-method) = 除數 (chu2 shu4 = division-sum) = division. 十除二 (shi2 chu2 er4 = ten-divide-by-two) equals 五 (wu3, five), i.e. five is 一半 (yi1 ban4 = one-half) of ten.

Kids learn arithmetic symbols: 加符 (jia1 fu2 = addition-sign = +), 减符 (jian3 fu2 = subtraction-sign = -), 乘符 (cheng2 fu2 = multiplication-sign = x), 除符 (chu2 fu2 = division-sign = ÷).

by Diana Yue