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

合
Cantonese pronunciation: hap6
Meanings: derivation, cause, link, chance, because

合 = 吻合 (wen3 he2 = mouth/lips-close = fit/agree). 合法 (he2 fa3 = agree-law) = lawful/legitimate. 合理 (he2 li3 = agree-reason) = reasonable. Wounds 癒合 (yu4 he2 = heal-mend). 不謀而合 (bu4 mou2 er2 he2 = not-conspire-and/yet-agree) describes separately evolved but similar ideas.

Lovers 結合 (jie2 he2 = tie-knot-fit = marry). We congratulate them: “百年好合!” (bai2 nian2 hao3 he2 = hundred-years-good-unite = “A long, happy marriage!”) Couple合力 (he2 li4 = unite-strength = work together) to maintain family.

Angered spouse/employee threatens: “合則留,不合則去!” (he2 ze2 liu2, bu4 he2 ze2 qu4 = agree-then-stay, no-agree-then-leave = If we can get along, I'll stay. If not, I might as well leave!)

by Diana Yue