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 the prodigal son**

**離**

Putonghua pronunciation: *li2*
Cantonese pronunciation: *lei4*
Meanings: depart, leave, separate, desert, abandon


lago 離間 (*li2 jian4 = separate-block = creates misunderstanding/mistrust between) Othello and wife. Incompatible couples 離婚 (*li2 hun1 = separate-marriage = divorce), 離異 (*li2 yi4 = separate-alienate = are estranged). Novels describe 悲歡離合 (*bei1 huan1 li2 he2 = grief-joy-separation-union = all kinds of sad and happy events).

by Diana Yue