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: li2
Cantonese pronunciation: lei4
Meanings: leave, separate


Estranged couple plan 分手 (fen1 shou3 = separate-hands = part ways), 分居 (fen1 ju1 = separately-reside = living apart), 離婚 (li2 hun1 = leave-marriage = divorce), say philosophically, “Life is 離離合合 (li2 li2 he2 he2 = separation-separation-union-union = coming together, splitting up!”

Defeated leader’s followers 離心 (li2 xin1 = depart-heart = lose faith/trust). Iago told lies to 離間 (li2 jian4 = separate-bar = put distrust between) Othello and wife.

by Diana Yue