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 romantic love

引

Putonghua pronunciation: yin3
Cantonese pronunciation: yan5
Meanings: draw, stretch, lead, cause, attract

引 (radical 弓 gong1, bow) pictures archer 引弓 (yin3 gong1 = drawing/stretching-bow). 引而不發 (yin3 er2 bu4 fa1 = draw-bow-yet-not-release-arrow) = militarily prepared without attacking.

引起 (yin3 qi3 = cause-to-begin) = 引致 (yin3 zhi4 = bring-about). Physicist 引導 (yin3 dao3 = guides-advises) students to calculate 引力 (yin3 li4 = gravitational-force). Factory 引進 (yin3 jin4 = lead-enter = introduces) technology. Grenadier 引爆 (yin3 bao4 = cause-explode = detonates) bomb. 藥引 (yao4 yin3 = medicine-lead) = medicinal catalyst.

Women with吸引 (yin3 ren2 = attract-person = attractive) looks can 吸引 (xi1 yin3 = suck-draw = attract), 引誘 (yin3 you3 = attract/lure/seduce) men. 引狼入室 (yin3 lang2 ru4 shi1 = bring-wolf-into-chamber) = willingly/foolishly admit/befriend a potential enemy.

by Diana Yue