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 O.

This week: Words about World War II

分 Putonghua pronunciation: fen1 Cantonese pronunciation: fan1
Meaning: split, divide, separate, partition

分 (radical 刀 dao1, knife) means cut/divide/separate: 分別 (fen1 bie2 = distinction-difference), 分離 (fen1 li2 = separation-departure), 分店 (fen1 dian4 = branch-shop), 分享 (fen1 xiang3 = divide-enjoy = share) gain/happiness. 分家 (fen1 jia1 = split/redistribute-family- assets).

After WWI the Ottoman Empire was 瓜分 (gua1 fen1 = melon-split/cut = carved up). After WWII Germany 分裂 (fen4 lie4 = divide-crack = was divided).

分析 (fen1 xi1 = separate-dissect = analyses) predict: 分久必合 (fen1 jiu3 bi4 he2 = split-up-long-time-will-definitely-combine = enemies will unite), 合久必分 (he2 jiu3 bi4 fen1 = combined-long-time-will-definitely-split-up = allies will part ways); US, EU, China will 三分天下 (san1 fen1 tian1 xia4 = three-divide-heaven-below = control world as three major powers).

by Diana Yue