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 surgical operations

縫
Putonghua pronunciation: feng2
Cantonese pronunciation: fung4
Meaning: sew, slot, gap, seam, crack, fault

縫 (radical 系 si1, thread/silk) means 縫紉 (feng2 ren4 = sew-twist/join) = sewing with 針線 (zhen1 xian4 = needle-thread). 剪縫 (cai2 feng2 = make-pattern-sew = tailor) uses 縫紉機 (feng2 ren4 jil = sewing-machine), 縫衣 (feng2 yi1 = sews/makes-clothes). 裂縫 (lie4 feng2 = break/crack/fault/gap) = crack/rift in rock/wall/friendship.

見縫插針 (jian4 feng2 cha1 zhen1 = see-crack-insert-needle) means pushing/planting connections/influence wherever possible. 縫縫補補 (feng2 feng2 bu3 bu3 = sew-sew-mend-mend) describes housewife mending clothes or plan repeatedly amended/patched up.

Dentist cleans patient’s 牙縫 (ya2 feng2 = teeth-spaces). Surgeon 縫合 (feng2 he2 = suture/stitch-close = sews up) wound/incision, eliminating any 縫隙 (feng2 xi4 = gap-small-space). 天衣無縫 (tian1 yil wu2 feng2 = heaven-made- garment-has-no-seam/fault) describes seamless/perfect plan/cooperation.

by Diana Yue