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 divorce

裂 (radical 衣 yi1, clothes) = 裂開 (lie4 kai1 = crack/break-open). Broken mirror has 裂痕 (lie4 hen2 = crack-mark = crack).
Waves push through dam’s 裂縫 (lie4 feng2 = crack-seam = cracks), create 裂口 (lie4 kou3 = crack-mouth = wide opening).
裂唇 (lie4 chun2 = crack-lip) = 兔唇 (tu4 chun2 = hare-lip) = child’s cleft-lip.

Because conspirators 搞分裂 (gao3 fen1 lie4 = stir-divide-break = stir up divisive actions), country 四分五裂 (si4 fen1 wu3 lie4 = four-divide-five-break = is split into factions).

新婚夫婦 (xin1 hun1 fu1 fu4 = new-marry-husband-wife = newly-weds) enjoy 蜜月 (mi4 yue4 = honey-moon), cannot foresee 感情破裂 (gan3 qing2 po4 lie4 = feelings-emotions-break-split = breach of love).

by Diana Yue