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

Putonghua pronunciation: qüan4
Cantonese pronunciation: huen3
Meanings: urge, encourage, discourage, try to persuade

勸 (radical 力 li4, effort) = try to persuade: 勸説 (qüan4 shui4 = urge-persuade = use persuasion), 勸告 (qüan4 gao4 = urge-advise). Doctor 勸導 (qüan4 dao3 = urge-guide = counsels) patient to quit smoking. 勸酒 (qüan4 jiu3 = urge-alcohol/wine) = nagging at someone to drink more wine.

In politics, 勸進 (qüan4 jin4 = urge-advance) means encouraging someone to take power, 勸退 (qüan4 tui4 = urge- retreat) means politely asking/forcing someone not to take power.

Couple 打架 (da3 jia4 = hit-rack = fight), friends 勸架 (qüan4 jia4 = urge-rack = urge them to stop fighting). Wife files for divorce, friends 苦勸 (ku3 qüan4 = bitter/hard-urge = urge hard) but 勸不動 (qüan4 bu4 dong4 = urge-no-move = persuasion doesn’t work).

by Diana Yue