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 ECFA (Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement)

Putonghua pronunciation: cu4
Cantonese pronunciation: chuk1
Meanings: pressed, quick, urgent, urge, speed up, get close

促 = (力 = person ren2, person) + 足 (zu2, foot) indicates stepping forward. 急促 (ji2 cu4 = urgent-quick) describes speech/music’s quick tempo. 短促 (duan3 cu4 = short-pressed) describes short period/meeting/life.

Supervisor 督促 (du1 cu4 = order-urge = watches/monitors) production, 催促 (cui1 cu4 = hurry-urge) workers: “Time is紧促 (jin3 cu4 = tight-urgent)! 死线 (si3 xian4 = dead-line)’s tomorrow!” Salesmen 促銷 (cu4 xiao1 = urge-we-sell = promote/push) goods.

ECFA will 促進 (cu4 jin4 = speed-up-forward = push/improve) Mainland-Taiwan economic cooperation, 促使 (cu4 shi3 = speed-up-let = make) Taiwan’s原居民 (yuan2 ju1 min2 = original-reside-people = aboriginal tribes), 閩南人 (min3 nan2 ren2 = Fujian-south-people = Han-Chinese originally from southern Fujian Province) understand Mainland China better.

by Diana Yue