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

分

Putonghua pronunciation: fen1
Cantonese pronunciation: fan1
Meanings: divide, split, separate, lot

分 shows 刀 (dao1, knife) splitting object, means divide/separate: 分開 (fen1 kai1 = separate-open = divided), 分別 (fen1 bie2 = separate-distinguish = difference), 分界 (fen1 jie4 = dividing-line/border), 分析 (fen1 xi1 = separately-dissect = analyze).

Avenue 分叉 (fen1 cha4 = split-fork = splits into) lanes. Bosom friends 分享 (fen1 xiang3 = divide-enjoy = share) thoughts. Successful shop opens 分店 (fen1 dian4 = branch-shop). Estranged partners 分道揚镳 (fen1 dao4 yang2 biao1 = separate-road-wave-carriage-banner = go separate ways).

Couple 分手 (fen1 shou3 = separate-hands = split up), 分居 (fen1 jü1 = separately-reside = live apart), discuss 分家 (fen1 jia1 = split-family = splitting family assets), 財產分配 (cai1 chan3 fen1 pei4 = wealth-property-divide-allot = assets distribution).

by Diana Yue