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: li2
Cantonese pronunciation: lei4
Meanings: leave, depart, separate, desert, abandon

離 = 離開 (li2 kai1 = leaves/goes-away), 離別 (li2 bie2 = leave-departure). Visitor 離去 (li2 qū4 = leaves-is-gone), traveler 離家 (li2 jia1 = leaves-home), graduate 離校 (li2 xiao4 = leaves-school), retiree 離職 (li2 zhi2 = leaves-post).

Enemy 離間 (li2 jian4 = separate-block-off = sew bad feelings between) friends, then離棄 (li2 qi4 = abandons-deserts) them. 貌合神離 (mao4 he2 shen2 li2 = appearance-unite-spirit-separate) describes couple staying together despite lack of mutual interest/care.

In old China men could 休妻 (xiu1 qi1 = rest/stop-wife = annul wife). Today, couple undergoing 離婚 (li2 hun1 = separate-marriage = divorce) must 分居 (fen1 jū1 = separately-reside = live apart), settle 贍養費 (shan4 yang3 fei4 = supply-support-fees = alimony).

by Diana Yue