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 relatives

疏 (radical 梳 shu1, comb-teeth) means separate/loose/dispel: 疏落 (shu1 luo4 = apart-few = scanty) stars/passengers, 疏懒 (shu1 lan3 = undisciplined-lazy) person. 百密一疏 (bai2 mi4 yi1 shu1 = hundred-close-knit-one-omission) means single/fatal 疏忽 (shu1 hu1 = careless-omission) in otherwise flawless plan/action.

Canals 疏導 (shu1 dao3 = disperse-channel/re-direct) flood-water. 疏通 (shu1 tong1 = dredge-through) means clearing pipes/traffic or paying bribes. Police 疏散 (shu1 san4 = disperse-evacuate) crowds.

親疏有別 (qin1 shu1 you3 bie2 = close/dear-distant/apart-has-difference) is selfish mentality favoring kin/buddies against outsiders. Snob 疏遠 (shu1 yuan3 = apart-distance = distances himself from) loser. 天網恢恢, 疏而不漏 (tian1 wang3 hui1 hui1, shu1 er2 bu4 lou4 = heaven's-net-wide-wide, loose-but-won't-drop/omit) means fate never lets wrongdoers escape unpunished.

by Diana Yue