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 diplomatic relations

友
Putonghua pronunciation: you3
Cantonese pronunciation: yau5
Meanings: friend, befriend

友 = 友人 (you3 ren2 = friend-person) = 朋友 (peng2 you3 = companion-friend) = friend. 至親好友 (zhi4 qin1 hao3 you3 = extreme-dear-good-friends) means one’s family, close relatives and friends.

女朋友 (nü3 peng2 you3 = female-friend) = girlfriend, 男朋友 (nan2 peng2 you3 = male-friend) = boyfriend. However, 老朋友 (lao3 peng2 you3 = old-companion-friend) means long-time familiar/endeared friend/chum, regardless of age/sex, free of romance.

Countries develop 友誼 (you3 yi2 = friend-good-relation = friendships), become 友邦 (you3 bang1 = friendly-state = nations on good terms with each other), establish 邦交 (bang1 jiao1 = states’-cross/friendship = diplomatic relations), exchange 大使 (da4 shi4 = big-envoy = ambassadors), form alliance, become 盟友 (meng2 you3 = alliance-friend = allies).

by Diana Yue