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 comradeship

聯
Putonghua pronunciation: lian2
Cantonese pronunciation: luen4
Meaning: link, join, alliance, combination, contact, relate

聯 (耳 er3, ear + 系 xi4, link) means 聯系 (lian2 xi4 = link-contact), 聯合 (lian2 he2 = join-unite): 聯名 (lian2 ming2 = jointly-sign/propose), 聯婚 (lian2 hun1 = join-in-matrimony), 聯軍 (lian2 jün1 = allied-forces). 聯絡人 (lian2 le42 ren2 = link-tanger-person) = contact-person/liaison-officer.

聯邦 (lian2 bang1 = joined-states) = federation, 聯邦調查局 (lian2 bang1 diao4 cha2 jü2 = federal-investigate-bureau) = US’s Federal Bureau of Investigation, abbr. FBI; 聯想 (lian2 xiang3 = linked-thoughts) = imagination/association or Chinese name of Lenovo.

Comrades 聯手 (lian2 shou3 = join-hands/forces), form 聯盟 (lian2 meng2 = joint-alliance). In 1971 PRC 入聯 (ri4 lian2 = entered-聯合国 lian2 he2 guo2 = link-join-countries = the United Nations), replacing ROC.

by Diana Yue