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 political parties

伐 (fa2)
Putonghua pronunciation: fa2
Cantonese pronunciation: fat6
Meanings: hack, fell, cut down, chop, kill, attack

伐 (fa2) — 人 ren2, person + 戈 ge1, lance) shows person beheaded/killed by knife/lance. 砍伐 (kan3 fa2 = chop-hack) = chopping trunks of humans/trees. Lumberjacks伐木 (fa2 mu4 = chop- wood = fell trees). Pioneers伐竹取道 (fa2 zhu1 qu3 dao4 = chop-bamboos-obtain-path = clear bamboo trees to make walking path).

In warfare, 伐 means military attack launched by stronger/ righteouse side against enemy. Army 征伐 (zheng1 fa2 = march-attack) rebels: 遠征 (yuan3 zheng1 = goes on long march) to 討伐 (tao3 fa2 = denounce-attack = attack/punish) rebels. 殺伐盈耳 (sha1 fa2 ying2 er3 = kill-hack-fill-ears) describes battlefield resounding with war cries.

口誅筆伐 (kou3 zhu1 bi3 fa2 = mouth-condemn-pen-attack) means launching publicity campaign to condemn someone's behavior.

by Diana Yue