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

敵
Putonghua pronunciation: di2
Cantonese pronunciation: dik6
Meanings: enemy, foe, rival


敵對 (di2 dui4 = enemy-facing = antagonistic) countries collect 敵情 (di2 qing1 = enemy-circumstances/information = enemy intelligence). Foolish ruler敵友不分 (di2 you3 bu4 fen1 = enemy-friend-no-distinguish = can’t tell friend from foe), 輕敵 (qing1 di2 = light/under-estimates enemy), eventually 不敵 (bu4 di2 = cannot-enemy/compete = is beaten by) invader.

Superpower has no 敵手 (di2 shou3 = enemy-hand = rival). 天下 無敵 (tian1 xia4 wu2 di2 = heaven-below-no-enemy) describes strongest/matchless hero/weaponry/scheme.

by Diana Yue