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

異（yì）

Putonghua pronunciation: yi4
Cantonese pronunciation: yi6
Meanings: hack, fell, cut down, chop, kill, attack

異 = 不同 (bu4 tong2 = not~same, dissimilar), 奇異 (qi2 yi4 = odd~strange). Teenagers fancy 異性 (yi4 xing4 = opposite~sex). Fickle person 見異思遷 (jian4 yi4 si1 qian1 = see~another~ponder~change = wants someone/something else).

Unhappy couple 離異 (li2 yi4 = separate~alienate = divorce). Traitor develops 異心 (yi4 xin1 = separate~heart = intention of leaving/betrayal). “異鄉人” (yi4 xiang1 ren2 = different~village/homeland~person) is Chinese title of Camus’ L’Etranger.

黨同伐異 (dang3 tong2 fa2 yi4 = party/ally~same~attack~different) means ganging up with like-minded buddies and persecuting opponents. Dictator hates 異己 (yi4 ji3 = different~self = those with different views/loyalties), banishes 異見份子 (yi4 jian4 fen4 zi0 = different~opinion~part~ diminutive = dissidents) to異國 (yi4 guo2 = alien~country).

by Diana Yue