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 \

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 wedding day

Hang - Putonghua pronunciation: hun1
Cantonese pronunciation: fan1
Meaning: marriage, marry, wed

Characters 婚 (hun1 = marry/marriage), 娶 (qü3 = take wife), 嫁 (jia4 = wed husband), 媲 (mei2, matchmaker) all have radical 女 (nü3, female/woman). Today people prefer 婚姻自由 (hun1 yin1 zi4 you2 = marriage-link-self-self = freedom of marriage) to 盲婚 嫁 (mang2 hun1 ya3 jia4 = blind-marry-mute-wed-husband = arranged marriages).

Lovers 訂婚 (ding4 hun1 = book-marriage = get engaged), hold 婚禮 (hun1 li3 = marriage-ceremony = wedding), sign 婚約 (hun1 yue4 = marriage-agreement), exchange 結婚指環 (jie2 hun1 zhi3 huan2 = tie-knot-marriage-finger-ring = wedding rings/bands), give 婚宴 (hun1 yan4 = wedding-banquet).

Without 婚前協議 (hun1 qian2 xie2 yi3 = marriage-before-agree-discuss = prenuptial agreement), loving couple celebrates 金婚 (jin1 hun1 = gold-marriage = golden wedding anniversary).

by Diana Yue