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 < 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 plans and timetables

Putonghua pronunciation: hua4
Cantonese pronunciation: waak6
Meaning: scratch, draw, sweep, plan, project, incorporate into, divide, uniform

動 (radical = 刀 dao1, knife/blade) means scratch/draw.
Shaving-blade 刮傷 (hua4 shang1 = scratch-wound = cuts) face.
Lightning 刮破 (hua4 po4 = scratch-break = makes cracks across) the sky. Bordering countries 劃界 (hua4 jie4 = draw/define-boundary).

Broken-up couple 劃破臉 (hua4 po4 lian3 = scratch-break-face = openly quarrel), 劃清界限 (hua4 qing1 jie4 xian4 = draw-clear-border-limit = draws clear-cut division-line), announces relationship 劃上句號 (hua4 shang4 jü4 hao4 = draw-on-sentence-symbol = writes full-stop = is finished).

Company 計劃 (ji4 hua4 = plans-projects/prepares) going public. CEO 策劃 (ce4 hua4 = policy-regulate = leads/masterminds) 劃一 (hua4 yi1 = draw-one = uniform/streamline) accounting procedures, earnings 劃入 (hua4 ru4 = incorporated-into) seed capital, 劃分 (hua4 fen1 = draw/define-divide)

by Diana Yue