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 wedding day

偶
Putonghua pronunciation: ou3
Cantonese pronunciation: ngau5
Meaning: doll, pair, companion, mate, partner, random

偶 (radical 亻 = 人 ren2, human/person) means lifeless figure: 人偶 (ren2 ou3 = human-doll/figurine/mannequin), 木偶 (mu4 ou3 = wooden-doll/puppet), 偶像 (ou3 xiang4 = doll-image = idol: deity’s man-made image or fans’ beloved darling).

偶然 (ou3 ran2 = coincidental-ly) describes chance/rare occurrences, but 偶 actually means two/pair: 偶數 (ou3 shu4 = even-number), 配偶 (pei4 ou3 = matching-companion = spouse/partner), 不兼容 couple becomes 怨偶 (yuan4 ou3 = mutually-blaming/unhappy-pair). Wife’s death gives husband 喪偶之痛 (sang4 ou3 zhi1 tong4 = die/lose-spouse’s -pain = grief of losing spouse).

Bachelor 求偶 (qiu2 ou3 = beg/seek-mate = wants a wife). Guests praise bride-and-groom: “佳偶天成!” (jia1 ou3 tian1 cheng2 = good-mates-heaven-made = “Perfect match! You two are born for each other!”

by Diana Yue