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 right and wrong**

對 (dui4)
Cantonese pronunciation: dui3
Meanings: right, facing, pair

對 (identical pair) means 對稱 (dui4 cheng4 = pair-balance = symmetrical), 相襯 (xiang1 chen4 = mutual-match = matching), hence fitting/correct/right.

說得對! (shuo4 de0 dui4 = say-effectively-right) = What you said is right! 做得對! (zuo4 de0 dui4 = do-effectively-right) = You did the right thing! 對不對? (dui4 bu4 dui4 = right-no-right) = Is that right? 不對! (bu4 dui4 = no-right = wrong) also means “Wait a sec – there’s something wrong/fishy here!”

對 means face/facing. 對不起 (dui4 bu4 qi3 = face-no-allow = feel ashamed/undeserved) = apology “Sorry!” or “has dis-advantaged/wronged” someone. Denying fault/infidelity, spouse/partner says: 我對得起你! (wo3 dui4 de0 qi3 ni3 = I-face-effectively-allow-you = To you, I’m faultless, conscience-clean!)

by Diana Yue