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 contracts

約
Putonghua pronunciation: yue1
Cantonese pronunciation: yeuk3
Meaning: appointment, contract, bind, control, restrain, constrain

約 (radical 組 xi4 = silk/thread/bind) indicates bind/agree: 約見 (yue1 jian4 = make-appointment-to-see), 約會 (yue1 hui4 = agreed-meeting = date/appointment), 條約 (tiao2 hui1 = line/section-contract = treaty), 死約 (si3 yue1 = dead/fixed/irrevocable-contract).

Lawyer drafts 合約 (he2 yue1 = agree/combine-bind = contract). Partners 簽約 (qian1 yue1 = sign-contract). 租約 (zou1 yue1 = rental-agreement/contract) is 商業合約 (shang1 ye43 he2 yue1 = commercial-contract), has 約束力 (yue1 su1 li4 = bind-tie-strength/power = binding power), partners must 守約 (shou3 yue1 = guard-contract = honour contract).

佳人有約 (jia1 ren2 you3 yue1 = beautiful-person-has-appointment) = has date/rendez-vous with pretty woman. Man 赴約 (fu4 yue1 = goes-to-appointment), but she 失約 (shi1 yue1 = lose-appointment = didn’t show up).