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 Halloween

扮 (ban4)
Cantonese pronunciation: baan6
Meanings: dress up, feign, pretend, disguise, impersonate

扮 (fān) 手 (shou3) 手 + 分 (fen1) 手 separates) means impersonate/feign. Women 打扮 (da3 ban4 = hit/-make-up = wear make-up/jewelry). Actors/actresses 扮演 (ban4 yan3 = feign-play/act) different roles. 化妆派对 (hua4 zhuang1 yan1 pai4 dui4 = transform-make-up-“party”-transliterated = costume party)-goers appear in different扮相 (ban4 xiang4 = make-up/dress-appearance = specially-designed looks).

Emperor 扮老百姓 (ban4 lao3 bai3 xing4 = feign-old-hundred-surnames = disguises himself as commoner), 微服出巡 (wei1 fu2 chu1 xun2 = tiny/lowly-dress-go-out-inspect = tours/inspects places dressed/disguised as commoner).

Clown 扮鬼臉 (ban4 gui3 lian3 = pretend-ghost-face = makes grimaces/funny faces). At Halloween kids 扮鬼 (ban4 gui3 = pretend-ghost = wear ghosts/spooks’ outfits), 扮女巫 (ban4 nu3 wu2 = pretend-women-medium/witch = wear witches’ dress/make-up).

by Diana Yue