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 regime change

變 (bian4)
Cantonese pronunciation: bin3
Meanings: change, transform

變 = 變遷 (bian4 qian1 = change-move-away = change of situation/status): 變好 (bian4 hao3 = change-good = improve), 變壞 (bian4 huai4 = change-bad = worsen). 氣候變化 (qi4 hou4 bian4 hua4 = air-season-change-transform = climate change).

Heartless lover 變心 (bian4 xin1 = change-heart = loves another), 變臉 (bian4 lian3 = change-face = turns hostile). 變色 (bian4 se1 = change-color) describes chameleon/defector or frightened/angry person's countenance turning pale/red.

人心思變 (ren2 xin1 si1 bian4 = people's-hearts-think/wish-change) = people want change. 政變 (zheng4 bian4 = politcl-change = coup) leads to 變天 (bian4 tian1 = change-sky = weather/regime change). Dictator 以不變應萬變 (yi3 bu4 bian4 ying4 wan4 bian4 = with-not-change-respond-to-ten-thousand-changes = makes mo moves, watches developments).

by Diana Yue