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

怪

Putonghua pronunciation: guai4
Cantonese pronunciation: gwaai3
Meanings: odd, strange, weird, bizarre, grotesque, ridiculous, monster

怪 = 奇怪 (qi2 guai4 = strange-odd), 怪人 (guai4 ren2 = eccentric-fellow), 怪事 (guai4 shi4 = strange-occurrence), 怪癖 (guai4 pi = queer/cranky-habit), 怪傑 (guai4 jie2 = eccentric-hero) = brilliant person having eccentric style/vision or uncommon success profile.

Tabloids spread 奇談怪論 (qi2 tan2 guai4 lun4 = strange-talk-odd-opinion = ridiculous stories/comments). 光怪陸離 (guang1 guai4 lu4 li2 = bright-strange-motley-odd) describes eye-dazzling/shocking outfits/decor or bizarre happenings.

怪物 (guai4 wu4 = strange-object) = monster. When 怪風 (guai4 feng1 = eerie-wind) blows, 尼斯湖怪 (Ni2 Si1 hu2 guai4 = “Ness”-transliterated-lake-monster = Loch Ness monster) appears. Ghost stories describe how 妖魔鬼怪 (yao1 mo2 gui3 guai4 = demons-devils-ghosts-monsters) 作怪 (zuo2 guai1 = do-strange = disturb/harm people).

by Diana Yue