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 O.

This week: Words about circuses

Putonghua pronunciation: za2
Cantonese pronunciation: jaap6
Meanings: lesser, impure, miscellaneous, mixed, crisscrossed

雑 (radical 衣 yī, clothes) means mixed: 雑務 (za2 wù4 = various-chores), 雑質 (za2 zhì2 = mixed-quality = impurities), 複雑 (fu1 za2 = complex-complicated), 雑牌軍 (za2 pai2 jūn1 = mixed-brand-army) = variously-sourced, inferior team.

雑貨店 (za2 huo4 dìan4 = miscellaneous-goods-store) sells 雑物 (za2 wù4 = miscellaneous-things), 雑志 (za2 zhì4 = miscellaneous-record = magazines). Chinatown sells 雑碎 (za2 sui4 = mixed-chopped = chop-suey), 牛雑 (niú2 za2 = cow’s- offals). 雑交 (za2 jiāo1 = mix-cross) means biological hybridization or sexual promiscuity. 雑種 (za2 zhòng3 = cross/promiscuous-seed) = hybrids/bastards.

Performing 雜技 (za2 jì4 = mixed-skills = 雑耍 (za3 shā3 = mixed-play = clown's tricks/acrobatics) requires 心無雜念 (xīn1 wù2 za2 nián4 = heart-no-mixed-thoughts = absolute concentration).

by Diana Yue