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 attires

衣 (yì)  Cantonese pronunciation: gōng1
Meanings: clothes, coating

衣 = 衣服 (yì fu = clothes-wear) = clothes. Models穿衣 (chuan1 yì = put-on-clothes), 脫衣 (tuo1 yì = take-off-clothes); 內衣 (nei4 yì = under-wear), 毛衣 (mao2 yì = woollen-clothes = woolies), 大衣 (da4 yì = big-clothes = long coat), 嫁衣 (jia2 yì = wedding-gowns). 衣著入時 (yì zhuo4 ru4 shi2 = clothes-wear-enter-time/trends) = fashionably attired.

高级時装 (gao1 ji2 shi2 zhuang1 = high-class-trendy-wear) = haute couture. 成衣 (cheng2 yì = ready-made-garments = prêt-a-porter) are usually 便服 (bian4 fu2 = easy/casual-wear).

衣冠禽獸 (yì guan1 qin2 shou4 = clothes-headware-bird-beast = beast in man’s attire) describes respectable-looking but hypocritical/despicable wrongdoers. 糖衣毒藥 (tang2 yì du2 yao4 = sugar-coated-poisonous-drugs) means sweet harmful lies.

by Diana Yue