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 circuses

彩 Putonghua pronunciation: cai3
Cantonese pronunciation: choi2
Meanings: multi-colored, colorful, luck

彩 (采 cai3, gather + 采 san1, three) means 彩色 (cai3 se1 = multi-color-hues), 光彩 (guang1 cai3 = brilliance-iridescence). 彩虹 (cai3 hong2 = iridescent-rainbow) = rainbow. 唐三彩 (Tang2 san1 cai3 = Tang-Dynasty-tri-color potteryware) has yellow-green-red glaze.

光彩照人 (guang1 cai3 zhou4 ren2 = light-colors-shine-on-people) describes glamorous woman. 神彩飛揚 (shen2 cai3 fei1 yang2 = spirit-multi-colors-fly-raise) describes spirited/inspired look/writing. 博彩 (bao2 cai3 = risk-luck) = gambling.

Circus show 多彩多姿 (duo1 cai3 duo1 zil = many-colors-many-gestures = has attractive variety). Laser-lighting is 七彩繽紛 (qi1 cai3 bin1 fen1 = seven-colors-profuse-many = colorful, eye-dazzling). Audience 喝彩 (he1 cai3 = loudly-applaud), never 喝倒彩 (he1 dao3 cai3 = shout-reverse-splendid = boo).

by Diana Yue