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 China's economic take-off

Putonghua pronunciation: zhuan2
Cantonese pronunciation: joan6
Meanings: earn, win, make profit, gain

Ideogram 賺 shows 貝 (bei4, seashell/money) + 兼 (jian1, merge). Workers 賺取 (zhuan4 qū3 = earn-obtain = earn) wages. 賺錢 (zhuan4 qian2 = earn-money) means make profit or profit-making/lucrative. 生意人 (sheng1 yi4 ren2 = live-idea-person = businessman) hopes to 賺大錢 (zhuan4 da4 qian2 = earn/make-big-money/profit = 發大財 fa1 da4 cai2 = burst-big-wealth = become very rich).

Tear-jerker 賺人熱淚 (zhuan4 ren2 re4 lei4 = earn-person-hot-tears = makes people cry). Lucky guy 白賺 (bai2 zhan44 = white/pure-earn/win = gets profit/advantage without making effort/investment).

賺’s opposite is 賠 (pei2, repay/make-up). 賠本生意 (pei2 ben3 sheng1 yi4 = pay-up-live-idea) = money-losing business. Martyr 賠上 (pei2 shang4 = pays-up) life, 賺得 (zhuan4 de2 = gains-gets) sympathy/respect.

by Diana Yue