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 operas

( radical 言 yan2 = mouth)
Putonghua pronunciation: ci2
Cantonese pronunciation: chi4
Meanings: word, term, lyrics

In Chinese, 字 (zi4, characters/words) form 詞 (ci2, words/terms). 字典 (zi4 dian3 = characters/words-classic = dictionaries) contain 詞彙 (ci2 hui4 = words/terms-assemble = vocabulary). Chinese 詞 (ci2, “ci poems” having fixed melody/rhyme schemes) can be read or sung.

Stage actor delivers 台詞 (tai2 ci2 = stage-words = lines/dialogue). 填詞人 (tian2 ci2 ren2 = fill-in-words-person = lyricist) writes 曲詞 (qu3 ci2 = song-words = song lyrics) for composer’s melody.

歌劇 (ge1 ju3 = opera)’s 歌詞 (ge1 ci2 = song-words = libretti) tell stories of 悲歡離合 (bei1 huan1 li2 he2 = sorrow-joy-separation-union = many sad/happy events). Cheerful words fit 快板 (kuai4 ban3 = fast-clapper-beat = fast tempo). Sad/sombre words fit 慢板 (man4 ban3 = slow-clapper-beat = slow tempo).

by Diana Yue