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

帽 (＝帽子 = mao4 zi0 = hat diminutive) protects 頭顱 (tou2 lu2 = head-skull = head). Qing Dynasty men wore 瓜皮帽 (gua1 pi2 mao4 = melon-skin-hat = small hat shaped like half watermelon).

Gents wear 禮帽 (li3 mao4 = ritual-hat = top hats), 小圓禮帽 (xiao3 yuan2 li3 mao4 = small-round-ritual-hat = bowler hats).

Soldiers wear 貝雷帽 (bei4 lei2 mao4 = “beret”-transliterated-hats). 鴨舌帽 (ya3 she2 mao4 = duck-tongue/bill-hat) = peaked caps. 帽舌 (mao4 she2 = hat-tongue) = visors. 四方帽 (si4 fang1 mao4 = four-corner-hat = square academic hat) symbolizes academic qualification.

Political jargon 扣帽子 (kou4 mao4 zi0 = slap-on-hat) means putting condemnatory tag on someone. 脫帽 (tuo1 mao4 = take-off-hat) means rehabilitation.

by Diana Yue