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 promotion

賀
Putonghua pronunciation: he4
Cantonese pronunciation: hoh6
Meanings: offer congratulations, offer gift to celebrate

賀 = 加 (jia1, add) + 貝 (bei4, seashell/money), means congratulating someone by offering gift/words: 賀卡 (he4 ka3 = congratulatory-card), 賀電 (he4 dian4 = congratulatory-telegram), 賀禮 (he4 li3 = congratulatory-gift).

Birthday boy receives 祝賀 (zhu1 he4 = blessings-congratulations). Party-guests 道賀 (dao4 he4 = say-congratulations = make congratulatory remarks), 致賀詞 (zhi4 he4 ci2 = deliver-congratulatory-speech), 敬酒 (jing4 jiu3 = respect-wine = raise toast). People visit relatives/friends during Chinese New Year to 賀歲 (he4 sui4 = congratulate-year = celebrate the New Year).

賀客盈門 (he4 ke4 ying2 men2 = congratulate-guests-fill-doors = Many visitors come to congratulate) newly-promoted CEO: “可喜可賀!” (ke3 xi3 ke3 he4 = can-happy-can-congratulate = This is really worth rejoicing and celebrating!

by Diana Yue