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

Putonghua pronunciation: qin4
Cantonese pronunciation: chan3
Meanings: match, matching, support

襴 = 襴托 (qin4 tuo4 = match-support/raise) = match and enhance. Leaves 映襴 (ying3 qin4 = reflect-match/highlight) flowers. 襴色 (qin4 se1 = match-color) = color-matching.

套裝 (tao4 zhuang1 = set-wear = suit), 襴衣 (qin4 yi3 = match-clothes = shirt/blouse), 領帶 (ling3 dai4 = collar-belt/string = necktie) must 相襴 (xiang1 qin4 = mutually-match). 香奈兒 (Xiang1 Nei4 Er2 = “Chanel”-transliterated)’s 小黑裙 (xiao3 hei1 qun2 = Little-Black-Dress) should 配襴 (pei4 qin4 = match-support = blend with) 手套 (shou3 tao4 = hand-gloves), 手袋 (shou3 dai4 = hand-bag), 飾物 (shi1 wu4 = decorate-thing = accessories).

Supporting cast 陪襴 (pei2 qin4 = accompany-match/enhance = serve to highlight) main actors. Frog and princess 不襴 (bu4 qin4 = don’t-match).

by Diana Yue