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 V 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 moving

包
Putonghua pronunciation: bao1
Cantonese pronunciation: baau1
Meanings: bag, wrap, bun, enfold, pack, tolerate, absorb

包 means bag/wrap/bun: student’s 書包 (shu1 bao1 = book-bag = schoolbag), shopper’s 大包小包 (da4 bao1 xia3 bao1 = big-bags-small-bags), gifts’ 包裝 (bao1 zhuang1 = wrap-decorate = packaging), 叉燒包 (cha1 shao1 bao1 = fork-roast-bun = barbecued-pork buns).

Troops 包圍 (bao1 wei2 = surround-encircle/besiege) city. Movers 包紮 (bao1 za1 = wrap-tie) things into 包裹 (bao1 guo3 = wrap-enfold = parcel). 包袱 (bao1 fu2 = wrap-cloth) means cloth-tied bundle or old habit/hang-up deterring work/thinking’s progress.

錢包 (qian2 bao1 = money-bag) = Cantonese 荷包 (he2 bao1 = lotus-bag) = wallet/purse. Cantonese 打荷包 (da3 he2 bao1 = hit-wallet/purse) means pick someone’s pocket, but 荷包蛋 (he2 bao1 dan4 = wallet/purse-egg) means whole egg soft-fried on both sides.

by Diana Yue