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 translation

Putonghua pronunciation: yi 4
Cantonese pronunciation: yik 6
Meanings: translate

翻 (fan1) = 翻转 (fan1 zhuan3) = turnover/overturn. GDP 翻一番 (fan1 yi1 fan1 = turnover-one-time = doubles). 翻案 (fan1 an4 = turnover-file/case) = overturn judgment/verdict. Liberation makes poor peasants 翻身 (fan1 shen1 = turnover-body = rise/stand upright, gain stature/dignity).

翻譯 (fan1 yi4 = turnover-translate) = translate: 口譯 (kou3 yi4 = mouth/oral-translation), 筆譯 (bi3 yi4 = pen/written-translation). 翻譯家 (fan1 yi4 jia1 = translation-master) = renowned translator of intellectual writings. Diplomats need 翻譯員 (fan1 yi4 yuan2 = translate-person = translators/interpreters).

Conferences hire 同聲傳譯 (tong2 sheng1 chuan2 yi4 = same-sound-convey-translate = simultaneous interpreters). Confucian classics’ English translations are 漢譯英 (han4 yi4 ying1 = Han-Chinese-translated-into-“Eng”lish-transliterated).

Encrypted messages need 破譯 (po4 yi4 = break-translate = decoding).

by Diana Yue