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

媒 (radical 女 nu3 = woman)
Putonghua pronunciation: mei 2
Cantonese pronunciation: mooi 4
Meanings: go-between, medium, media
媒 = go-between: 媒人 (mei2 ren2 = matchmaking-person), 媒婆 (mei2 po2 = matchmaker-grandma = woman matchmaker). In old China 父母之命 (fu4 mu3 zhi1 ming4 = father-mother-'s-order), 媒妁之言 (mei2 shuo4 zhi1 yan2 = man-'s-matchmaker-woman's-matchmaker-'s-words) decided son's/daughter's choice of spouse. 神媒 (shen2 mei2 = gods/ medium) communicate between gods/ghosts and humans.
疾病媒介 (ji2 bing4 mei2 jie4 = disease-illness-medium-between) = disease vector. 傳播媒介 (chuan2 bo4 mei2 jie4 = communicate-broadcast-media) = communications media e.g. newspapers/magazines/films. Television is 冷媒介 (leng3 mei2 ti3 = cold-medium-body = cool medium). 傳媒大亨 (chuan2 mei2 da4 heng3 = communications-media-big-success) = media tycoon e.g. Murdoch.
Translation is compared to 鳥媒 (niao3 mei2 = bird-medium = bird-bait for attracting/trapping other birds).

by Diana Yue