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: hua 4
Cantonese pronunciation: fa 3
Meanings: melt, change, dissolve, disintegrate, convert, transform


Ice 溶化 (rong2 hua4 = melt-change). Rocks 風化 (feng1 hua4 = are wind-disintegrate/eroded). 火化 (huo3 hua4 = fire-disintegrate) = cremation. 化石 (hua4 shi2 = transformed-stone) = fossil. Planets/landscapes/organisms are 造化之工 (zao4 hua4 zhi1 gong1 = creation-transformation’s-work = works of Creation/Nature).

Translator who attains 化境 (hua4 jing4 = transformation-realm = supreme art) doesn’t distinguish 同化 (tong2 hua4 = same-transformed = domestication), 異化 (yi4 hua4 = alien-transformed = foreignization) approaches.

by Diana Yue