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 false hopes

假
Putonghua pronunciation: jia3
Cantonese pronunciation: ga2
Meanings: false, unreal, pseudo, deceptive

假 = 虛假 (xü1 jia3 = empty-false/deceptive): 假貨 (jia3 huo4 = fake-goods), 假髮 (jia3 fa3 = false-hair = wig), 假名 (jia3 ming2 = pseudo-nym). 假如 (jia3 ru2 = false-resemble) = if. 假設 (jia3 she4 = false-set-up) = assumption/hypothesis. 假想敵 (jia3 xiang3 di2 = false-think-enemy) = imagined enemy/target.

Crooks 說假話 (shuo1 jia3 hua4 = say-false-words = lie), 弄虛作假 (nong4 xü1 zuo4 jia3 = play-with-empty-make-false = fabricate falsehood). 假 hypocrites 假情假義 (jia3 qing2 jia3 yi4 = false-feeling-false-righteousness = feign sympathy/devotion).

弄假成真 (nong4 jia3 cheng2 zhen1 = play-with-false-become-real) describes pretense/hoax turning into real/irreversible situation. 望梅止渴 (wang4 mei2 zhi3 ke3 = look-at-plum-stop-thirst) means taking consolation from 假象 (jia3 xiang4 = false-picture).

by Diana Yue