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 auctions

拍
Putonghua pronunciation: pai1
Cantonese pronunciation: paak3
Meanings: pat, hit, bang, auction

拍 (radical 手 = hand/arm) = beat with hand/palm. 拍門 (pai1 men2 = rap-on-door), 拍手 (pai1 shou3 = pat-hands = clap/applaud), 拍照 (pai1 zhao4 = hit-shutter-light-up = take photo).

節拍 (jie2 pai1 = bar-beat) = musical beat/rhythm. 合拍 (he2 pai1 = match-beat = get along well) become 拍檔 (pai1 dang4 = match-stall = working partners). 一拍兩散 (yi1 pai1 liang3 san4 = one-bang-two-split-up) = partners’ row, split-up.

拍案 (pai1 an4) = 拍桌子 (pai1 zhuo1 zi0 = hit-table-diminutive) = pound on table, usually in surprise/anger. 拍賣官 (pai1 mai4 guan1 = bang-sell-official = auctioneers) conduct 拍賣 (pai1 mai4 = bang-sell = auction sales) for 拍賣行 (pai1 mai4 hang2 = auction-hong/houses).

by Diana Yue