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

Putonghua pronunciation: mai4
Cantonese pronunciation: maa46
Meanings: sell, betray

貿貿 (mai3 mai4 = buy-sell) = business deal/transaction. Brokers 買入 (mai3 ru4 = buy-in), 賣出 (mai4 chu1 = sell-out) stocks.

Good employee/friend 賣力 (mai4 li4 = sell-strenth = enthusiastically render effort/help). Prostitutes 賣肉 (mai4 rou4 = sell-flesh = sell their bodies). 出賣 (chu1 mai4 = out-sell) = betray. Traitor 賣國求榮 (mai4 guo2 qiu2 rong2 = sell-country~seek-glory = betrays country for fame/fortune).

拍賣 (pai1 mai4 = bang-sell = auctioning)’s principle is 價高者得 (jia4 gao1 zhe3 de2 = price-high~person~take/receive = highest bidder gets the thing). Item has 底價 (di3 jia4 = bottom-price). Bidders 提價 (ti2 jia4 = raise-price). Auctioneer announces 賣價 (mai4 jia4 = selling-price). Nothing is 賣賣 (jian4 mai4 = cheaply-sold).

by Diana Yue