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 acting

扮 (Putonghua pronunciation: ban4)
Cantonese pronunciation: baan6
Meanings: make-up, pretend, act a part, impersonate

扮 (radical 手 = shou3, hand) = 裝 (zhuang1, dress/pretend):
装死 (zhuang1 si3 = pretend-to-be-dead), 扮窮 (ban4 qiong2 = pretend-to-be-poor). Women love 打扮 (da3 ban4 = hit/make-up = wearing cosmetics/jewelry/dresses): 淡妝 (dan4 zhuang1 = light-make-up) for day-time, 濃妝 (nong2 zhuang1 = rich/heavy-make-up) for parties.

Actors/stars扮演 (ban4 yan3 = make-up-act = play/act) different roles, have different 扮相 (ban4 xiang4 = make-up/dress- appearance = carefully-designed looks). In traditional Chinese opera, male actors 男扮女裝 (nan2 ban4 nu3 zhuang1 = man- pretend-woman-dress = dress as women) to play female roles. Clowns 扮鬼臉 (ban4 gui3 lian3 = pretend-ghost-face = make funny faces).

Cheats 扮猪食老虎 (ban4 zhu1 chi1 lao2 hu3 = pretend-pig-eat-old-tiger = play dumb to exploit others).

by Diana Yue