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

Putonghua pronunciation: yan3
Cantonese pronunciation: yin2
Meanings: evolve, develop, extend, deduce, practice, act, perform

演 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) originally means water’s under-current that flows/changes. Things/situations 演變 (yan3 bian4 = move/evolve-change). 演繹 (yan3 yi4 = develop/extend-interpret) = deduction, 归納 (gui1 na4 = return-collect/contain) = induction. Thomas Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics has Chinese translation with title “天演論” (Tian1 Yan3 Lun4 = heaven/nature-evolution-thesis).

Academy of Performing Arts teaches 演奏 (yan3 zou4 = perform-play-instrument), 演唱 (yan3 chang4 = perform-sing), 演技 (yan3 ji4 = acting-skills). 演員 (yan3 yuan2 = act/perform- member = actors/artistes) 演出 (yan3 chu1 = perform-out = perform). 表演 (biao3 yan3 = show-perform) = demonstration/show.

VIPs 演講 (yan3 jiang3 = perform-talk/speech = make speeches). Bully states stage 軍事演習 (jun1 shi4 yan3 xi2 = miliary-things-interpret/perform-practice = military exercises).

by Diana Yue