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: nian4
Cantonese pronunciation: nim6
Meanings: pronounce, recite


Drama/movie scripts contain 對白 (dui4 bai2 = facing/echoing-plain/colloquial = dialogue). Shakespearean actors excel in 唸白 (nian4 bai2 = reciting/delivering-dialogue/lines), 唸詩 (nan4 shi1 = reciting/delivering-poetry).

Monk/nun 唸經 (nian4 jing1 = recite-sutras/scriptures/prayers), fingering 唸珠 (nian4 zhu1 = reciting-beads = rosary).

Magicians 唸咒 (nian4 zhou4 = utter/chant-spells/curses). 唸唸 有詞 (nan4 nan4 you3 ci2 = utter-utter-has-words) describes person mumbling something inaudibly.

by Diana Yue