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 dress codes

便
Putonghua pronunciation: bian4, pian2
Cantonese pronunciation: bin6
Meaning: convenient, informal, casual, ease, expedient

便 (radical 亻 = person ren2, person) = convenient/casual. 便利店 (bian4 li4 bian4 = convenient-beneficial-shop = convenient stores) sell 便宜 (pian2 yi2 = easy-cheap = cheap) things: 方便麵 (fang1 bian4 mian4 = just-convenient/expedient-noodles = instant noodles), 便當 (bian4 dang4 = easy-done = bento).

MTR makes commuting 便捷 (bian4 jie2 = convenient-win = convenient). Truck-driver 與人方便 (yu3 ren2 bian4 = give-person-convenience = offers help), lets hiker 搭便車 (da1 bian4 che1 = ride-convenient-car = hitch a ride).

Host: “Come for 便飯 (bian4 fan4 = convenient/casual-rice/meal = casual lunch/dinner). Wear 便服 (bian4 fu2 = casual-attire/clothes), 休閒服 (xiu1 xian2 fu2 = vacation-leisure-clothes), 運動服 (yun4 dong4 fu2 = sports-wear), 便鞋 (bian4 xie2 = casual-shoes).”

by Diana Yue