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 plans and timetables

表
Putonghua pronunciation: biao3
Cantonese pronunciation: biu2
Meaning: outer, surface, list, table, chart, form, gauge, record

表 (毛 mao2, hair/fur + 衣 yi1, clothes) = surface: 表情 (biao3 qing2 = surface-feelings = expression), 表現 (biao3 xian4 = surface-appear = show/perform).

表 means gauge/record: 寒暑表 (han2 shu3 biao3 = cold-hot-gauge = thermometer), also means data list/chart: shop's 價目表 (jia4 mu4 biao3 = price-item-list = price-list), institution's 編制表 (bian1 zhi4 biao3 = arrange-system-list = establishment list), play/film's 演員表 (yan3 yuan2 biao3 = act-ors-cast), school/plan's 時間表 (shi2 jian1 biao3 = time-period-list = timetable/time-chart).

表格 (biao3 ge2 = list-squares) = form: 申請表 (shen1 qing3 biao3 = request-ask-form = application form), 報税表 (bao4 shui4 biao3 = report-taxes-form = tax return form). 表列 (biao3 lie4 = form-list) means presenting data in list/table/chart.

by Diana Yue