

Character Builder 您好學? 呀

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 fire

煤

Putonghua pronunciation: *mei2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *mooi4*

Meaning: coal

煤 (radical 火 *huo3*, fire) = coal, a 燃料 (*ran2 liao4* = burn-material = fuel) like 柴 (*chai2*, firewood), 石油 (*shi2 you2* = stone-oil = petroleum), 天然氣 (*tian1 ran2 qi4* = heaven-so-gas = natural gas) e.g. 頁岩氣 (*ye4 yan2 qi4* = leaf-cliff-gass = shale gas).

煤老板 (*mei2 lao3 ban3* = coal-old-plank/boss = coal magnates) purchase 煤層 (*mei2 ceng2* = coal-layers = coalbeds). 煤礦工人 (*mei2 kuang4 gong1 ren2* = coal-mine-work-ers) work in 煤坑 (*mei2 keng1* = coal-pits).

Homes used 煤球 (*mei2 qiu2* = coal-balls), 煤磚 (*mei2 zhuan1* = coal-bricks = briquettes), now 煤氣 (*mei2 qi4* = coal-gas). Open windows prevent 煤氣中毒 (*mei2 qi4 zhong4 du2* = coal-gas-hit-mark-poison = coal-gas poisoning).

by Diana Yue