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 high-speed trains

(Chinese character 赶)
Radical 走 zou3 = run
Putonghua pronunciation: gan3
Cantonese pronunciation: gon2
Meanings: hurry, chase

Verb intransitive 赶 indicates hurrying. 赶來趕去 (gan3 lai2 gan3 qu4 = hurry-come-hurry-go) = rushing around. Policemen 赶到 (gan3 dao4 = hurriedly-reach) crime scene. “趕快!” (gan3 kuai1 = hurry-quick) = “Hurry up!”

Verb transitive 赶 means drive/chase. Shepherds 赶羊 (gan3 yang2 = drive/tend-sheep). Vigilante 赶賊 (gan3 zei2 = chase-away-thieves). Workers 赶時間 (gan3 shi2 jian1 = hurry-time-period = pressed by time), do overtime. Lucky commuters 赶上尾班車 (gan3 shang4 wei3 ban1 che1 = hurry-on/board-tail-round-car = caught the last train/bus).

你追我赶 (ni3 zui1 wo3 gan3 = you-chase-l-chase) describes keen competition. Hongkong should 赶紧 (gan2 jin3 = hurry-tight = urgently) build high-speed train, or rivals will 赶過 (gan3 guo4 = hurry/chase-pass = overtake) us.

by Diana Yue