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

坐 (zuo4)
Cantonese pronunciation: joh6
Meanings: sit, board


坐井觀天 (zuo4 jing3 guan1 tian1 = sit-in-well-watch-sky) describes ignorant person’s narrow viewpoint/horizon. 坐享其成 (zuo4 xiang3 qi2 cheng2 = sit-enjoy-‘s-success) means effortlessly reaping/receiving gains.

by Diana Yue