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

速 (radical 三十年 = boat)
Putonghua pronunciation: su4
Cantonese pronunciation: chuk1
Meanings: speed, high speed

鐵路 (tie3 lu4 = iron-road = railway) = 列車 (lie4 che1 = row/line-car/carriage = train): 快列 (kuai4 lie4 = fast/non-stop/express-train), 慢列 (man4 lie4 = slow-train).

After Japan’s 新幹線 (xin1 gan4 xian4 = new-trunk-line = Shinkansen bullet-train), France’s 高速列車 (gao1 su4 lie4 che1 = high-speed-train = Train de Grande Vitesse, TGV), Germany’s 磁浮 (ci2 fu2 = magnetic-float = magnetic levitation = Maglev) train, China builds 中國高速鐵路 (Zhong1 Guo2 gao1 su4 tie3 lu4 = Middle-Kingdom-high-speed-iron-road = China Railway High-Speed, CRH).

CRH’s 和諧號 (he2 xie2 hao4 = blend-harmony-name = “Harmony”-trains) are 電動車組 (dian4 dong4 che1 zu3 = electrically-propelled-carriage-group = electric multiple-unit trains) with 速度 (su4-du4 = speed-degree = speed) of 350km/hour.

by Diana Yue