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 electricity

Putonghua pronunciation: dian4
Cantonese pronunciation: din6
Meaning: electric, electricity, electrify

電 (radical 雨 yu3, rain) = electricity: 雷電 (lei2 dian4 = thunder-and-lightning), 閃電 (shan3 dian4 = flash-of-lightning), 風馳電掣 (feng1 chi2 dian4 che4 = wind-ride-electricity-steer = at lightning speed).

水壩 (shui3 ba4 = water-dams), 風機 (feng1 ji1 = wind-machine = wind turbines), 太陽能板 (tai4 yang2 neng2 ban3 = ultimate-yang/male-principle-energy-board = solar panels) generate 電力 (dian4 li4 = electric-power) for 電燈 (dian4 deng1 = electric-lamps), 電話 (dian4 hua4 = electric-talk = telephones), 電視 (dian4 shi4 = electric-watch = television), 電腦 (dian4 nao3 = electric-brain = computers), 電郵 (dian4 you2 = electronic/e-mailing).

通電 (tong1 dian4 = pass-electricity) describes phone-call exchange or pair having right chemistry. 充電 (chong1 dian4 = charge-electricity) also means take smoke/booster-drink.

by Diana Yue