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

連 (radical 三 = boat)
Putonghua pronunciation: lian2
Cantonese pronunciation: lin4
Meanings: link, join, row, sequence

連 = link/row/sequence: 連續 (lian2 xu2 = link-continue = continuous), 連忙 (lian2 mang2 = link-hurried = quickly/hurriedly). 連鎖店 (lian2 suo3 dian4 = link-chain-shops) = chain stores.

連續劇 (lian2 xu2 ju2 = link-continue-drama) are serialized TV dramas. Story-lines have 連貫性 (lian2 guan4 xing4 = link-through-nature = continuity). 心連心 (xin1 lian2 xin1 = heart-join-heart) describes firm-hearted comrades/lovers.

公路 (gong1 lu4 = public-roads = highways), 鐵路 (tie3 lu4 = iron-road = railways), 地鐵 (di4 tie3 = ground-iron = underground railways) 連接 (lian2 jie2 = link up) to form 基建 (ji1 jian4 = foundation-construction = infrastructure) networks. 鐵路連線 (lian2 xian4 = linking-up-lines), facilitating Hongkong’s 連繫 (lian2 xi4 = link-tie = communication) with Mainland’s far-off regions.

by Diana Yue