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 working

Putonghua pronunciation: noun jin4, adj. jing4
Cantonese pronunciation: ging6
Meanings: strong, strength, spirit, interest, effort, keenness, fun


New execs 幹勁衝天 (gan4 jin4 chong1 tian1 = work-spirit-rush-skyward = work with tremendous zeal). 起勁 (qi3 jin4 = rise-fervor = keen/aggressive) player beats 不起勁 (bu4 qi3 jin4 = un-keen/laid-back) player. 不對勁 (bu4 dui4 jin4 = no-right-spirit/feel) means “Something’s wrong!”

Adjective 勁 means 強勁 (qiang2 jing4 = strong-powerful): 勁風 (jing4 feng1 = fierce/strong-gale), 勁敵 (jing4 di2 = tough-enemy). 疾風知勁草 (ji2 feng1 zhi1 jing4 cao3 = swift-wind-know-strong-grass) means harsh attacks show who is resilient.

by Diana Yue