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 speech-making

陈 [chen2]
Cantonese pronunciation: chan4
Meaning: stale, old, show, display, explain, state

陳 (radical 阝 er3, ear) = 陳舊 (chen2 jiu4 = stale-used/old/passe): 陳酒 (chen2 ji3 = mature-wine), 陳腔滥調 (chen2 qiang1 lan4 diao4 = stale-singing-style-over-used-tune = stale expressions/arguments), 陳跡 (chen2 ji1 = bygone-traces/spots). Oldies cherish 陳年往事 (chen2 nian2 wang3 shi4 = old-years-gone-events = the past).

陈列 (chen2 lie4 = show-display), 陳述 (chen2 shu4 = narration/account-tell). Model 玉體横陳 (yu4 ti3 heng2 chen2 = jade/beautiful-body-across-display = lies there showing gorgeous body). Invaders 陳兵邊界 (chen2 bing1 bian1 jie4 = show/amass-troops/army-along-border).

Radical denounces 陳腐 (chen2 fu4 = old-rotten) tradition, 力陳其害 (li4 chen2 qi2 hai4 = forcefully-explain-its-harm = emphasizes its bad/harmful effects), suggests 推陳出新 (tui1 chen2 chu1 xin1 = replacing-old/stale-things-with-new-things).

by Diana Yue