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 trains

動
Putonghua pronunciation: dong4
Cantonese pronunciation: dung4
Meaning: move, movement


Engineers 動員 (dong4 yuan2 = move-members = are mobilized), 動手 (dong4 shou3 = move-hands = get started) to build 動車組 (dong4 che1 zu3 = momentum-car-multiple-unit = rail motor coaches = high-speed trains). 動力 (dong4 li4 = moving-strength/momentum) makes train 開動 (kai1 dong4 = start moving), wheels 滾動 (gun3 dong4 = roll-and-move).

Investors 心動 (xin1 dong4 = heart-move = are interested), 主動 (zhu3 dong4 = master-move = actively) buy railway stocks.

by Diana Yue