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

轨
Putonghua pronunciation: gui3
Cantonese pronunciation: gwai2
Meaning: track, rut, orbit, path, course, rule, rail

軌 (radical 車 che1, car) = track/path/rail: planet’s 軌道 (gui3 dao4 = track-path = orbit), cart’s 軌跡 (gui3 zhi1 = tracks-traces/ruts), Trolley-buses 無軌 (wu2 gui3 = have-no-tracks). 有軌電車 (you3 gui3 dian4 che1 = has-tracks-electric-car) = tram/streetcar.

鐵路 (tie3 lu4 = iron-road = railways) have fixed 軌距 (gui3 jü41 = track-distance = track width), are 單軌 (dan1 gui3 = single-track) or 雙軌 (shuang1 gui3 = double-track). Casualties occur when train 出軌 (chu1 gui3 = leaves-track = derails).

Because of embezzlers’ 越軌 (yue4 gui3 = off/beyond-track = arrogating/unruly/disloyal) behavior, company’s finances 脫軌 (tuo1 gui3 = escape-track = go out of control), need fixing to 納入正軌 (na4 ru4 zheng4 gui3 = put-into-correct-path = get straightened again).

by Diana Yue