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

速
Putonghua pronunciation: su4
Cantonese pronunciation: chuk1
Meaning: fast, quick, rapid, urgent, speed, velocity

速 (radical 走 chuo4 = move/run) means 快速 (kuai4 su1 = fast-speedy), 速度 (su1 du4 = fast-degree = speed). 速記 (su1 ji4 = fast-record) = shorthand. 速印 (su1 yin4 = fast-print) = Xerox-printing. 速成班 (su1 cheng2 ban1 = fast-complete-class) = crash course. 光速 (guang1 su1 = light-speed) = speed of light.

Infrastructure construction progresses 神速 (shen2 su1 = god-fast = at amazing speed). 高速公路 (gao1 su1 gong1 lu4 = high-speed-public-road = super-highways/autobahns) allow 180 km/h 車速 (che1 su1 = car/driving-speed).

高速火車 (gao1 su1 huo3 che1 = high-speed-train) 提速 (ti2 su1 = raises-speed) to 300 km/h, then 減速 (jian3 su1 = reduces-speed) to 低速 (di1 su1 = low-speed) before stopping.

by Diana Yue