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 kitchens

煙
Putonghua pronunciation: yan1
Cantonese pronunciation: yin1
Meaning: smoke

煙 (radical 火 huo3, fire) means smoke: 煙霧 (yan1 wu4 = smoke/mist-fog), 煙雨 (yan1 yu3 = misty-rain/drizzle), 放煙花 (fang4 yan1 hua1 = release-smoke-flowers) = fireworks display.

煙薰 (yan1 xun1 = smoke-fumigate): 煙肉 (yan1 rou4 = smoked-meat = bacon).

香煙 (xiang1 yan1 = fragrance-smoke) = cigarette. 雪茄煙 (xue3 jia1 yan1 = “ci-gar”-transliterated-smoke) = cigar. 抽鴉片煙 (chou4 yan1 pian4 yan1 = draw/inhale-“o-pium”-transliterated-smoke) = smoke opium.

煙頭 (yan1 tou2 = cigarette-head/buts) 冒烟 (mao4 yan2 = rise smoke = emitting smoke) are dangerous. Use 煙灰缸 (yan1 hui1 gang1 = smoke-ash-pot = ashtray). 烽烧行 (feng1 yan1 si4 qi3 = watchtower-smoke-four-rise) describes fire-signals sent to warn invaders are crossing the border, or threat coming from on all sides.

by Diana Yue