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 fire

Putonghua pronunciation: shao1
Cantonese pronunciation: siu1
Meaning: burn, cook, fever

燒 (radical 火 huo3, fire) means 燃燒 (ran2 shao1 = burn-burn): 燃煤 (shao mei2 = burn-coal as fuel), 燃柴 (shao1 chai2 = burn-firewood as fuel). Patient 發燒 (fa1 shao1 = develops-fever), takes medicine, 退燒 (tui4 shao1 = subside-fever = fever goes away).

Housewives 燒水 (shao1 shui3 = boil-water), 燒飯 (shao1 fan4 = cook-rice/meal), make 燒餅 (shao1 bing3 = burn-cake = grilled sesame-topped crispy dough-cakes). Movie tycoon 燒錢 (shao1 qian2 = burns-money = flings away millions) for propaganda.

Bombed town 燃燒 (fen2 shao1 = burns-burns). Citizens 燒死 (shao1 si3 = are-burnt-dead), 燒傷 (shao1 shang1 = are-burnt-injured), everything 燒光 (shao1 guang1 = burn-light/cleared = burnt down/away completely). Mourning Buddhists pray, 燒香 (shao1 xiang1 = burn-fragrance/incense/joss-sticks).

by Diana Yue