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

煤 (radical 火 huo3, fire) = coal, a 燃料 (ran2 liao4 = burn-material = fuel) like 柴 (chai2, firewood), 石油 (shi2 you2 = stone-oil = petroleum), 天然氣 (tian1 ran2 qi4 = heaven-so-gas = natural gas) e.g. 煤岩氣 (ye4 yan2 qi4 = leaf-cliff-gass = shale gas).

煤老板 (mei2 lao3 ban3 = coal-old-plank/boss = coal magnates) purchase 煤層 (mei2 ceng2 = coal-layers = coalbeds). 煤礦工人 (mei2 kuang4 gong1 ren2 = coal-mine-work-ers) work in 煤坑 (mei2 keng1 = coal-pits).

Homes used 煤球 (mei2 qiu2 = coal-balls), 煤磚 (mei2 zhuan1 = coal-bricks = briquettes), now 煤氣 (mei2 qi4 = coal-gas). Open windows prevent 煤氣中毒 (mei2 qi4 zhong4 du2 = coal-gas-hit-mark-poison = coal-gas poisoning).

by Diana Yue