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

炸 Putonghua pronunciation: zha4
Cantonese pronunciation: ja3
Meaning: explode, deep fry

炸 (radical 火 huo3, fire) = explode. The ancient Chinese invented 炸藥 (zha4 yao4 = explode-medicine = explosives). 軍事炸機 (hong1 zha4 ji1 = charge/bomb-explode-airplane = bombers) drop 炸彈 (zha4 dan4 = explode-bullets/pellets = bombs), 炸死 (zha4 si3 = bomb-dead), 爆傷 (zha4 shang1 = bomb-injure) civilians, 炸裂 (zha4 lie4 = bomb-crack) window-glass, 炸毀 (zha4 hui3 = bomb-destroy) buildings.

炸 also means deep-frying food in hot oil: 炸油條 (zha4 you2 tiao2 = deep-fry-oil-strip = delicious deep-fried dough), 炸雞 (zha4 ji1 = deep-fried-chicken). But 氣炸肺 (qi4 zha4 fei4 = gas/anger-explode-lungs) describes person getting furious.

大爆破 (da4 bao4 zha4 = big-burst-explode) = Big Bang Theory. However, 爆炸裝 (bao4 zha4 zhuang1 = burst-explode-style) means Afro hair-style.

by Diana Yue