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 New York

急 (radical 心 xin1, heart) means urgent/anxious: 急事 (ji2 shi4 = urgent-business), 急件 (ji2 jian4 = urgent-parcel/document requiring immediate delivery), 急病 (ji2 zheng4 = sudden-illness), 尿急 (niao4 ji2 = urine-urgent = urgently wanting to pee).

Downtown New Yorkers 步履急促 (bu4 lü3 ji2 cu4 = steps-shoes-hurried-fast = walk hurriedly). 性急 (xing4 ji2 = temperamentally-impatient) investors 急功近利 (ji2 gong1 jin4 li4 = anxious-achievement-near-profit = are anxious/reckless to make achievements/profits).

Stockmarket's 急升 (ji2 sheng1 = rapid-rise), 急跌 (ji2 die2 = rapid-drop/fall), 急瀉 (ji2 xie4 = rapid-tumble) makes investor 心急如焚 (xin1 ji2 ru2 fen2 = heart-impatient-resemble-burning = extremely anxious/agitated), 急忙 (ji2 mang2 = hurriedly-impatiently) calls stockbroker, 急於 (ji2 yu1 = is-impatient-to) sell out.

by Diana Yue