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 zs 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 bachelors and spinsters

急
Putonghua pronunciation: ji2
Cantonese pronunciation: gap1
Meanings: urgent, impatient, hurry, hurried, abrupt, hasty

急 describes urgent/impatient/abrupt situations/feelings/actions: 性急 (xing4 ji2 = character-hurry = impatient) person, 緊急 (jin3 ji2 = tight-urgent = urgent/serious) situation. 便急 (bian4 ji2 = faeces/excrete-urgent) = needs to shit rightaway, 尿急 (niao4 ji2 = urine-urgent) = needs to pee rightaway.

急速 (ji2 su1 = quick-speed = hurrying/fast). 急病 (ji2 bing4 = urgent-illness) needs 急救 (ji2 jiu4 = urgent-save = emergency treatment). Market 急劇 (ji2 jü2 = abrupt-dramatic) crashes. Investor 著急 (zhao4 ji2 = touch-impatience = gets alarmed), 急忙 (ji2 mang2 = hurry-busy = hastily) sells stocks.

Spinster is 心急 (xin1 ji2 = heart-urgent = impatient) to marry, but her date doesn't want to 操之過急 (cao1 zhi1 guo4 ji2 = handle-it-too-hurriedly = go ahead too quickly/hastily).

by Diana Yue