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 feeling good

Putonghua pronunciation: kuai4
Cantonese pronunciation: faai3
Meanings: quick, sharp, direct, pleasurable, cheer

快 = quick/fast/sharp: 快速 (kuai4 su1 = fast-speed), 快刀 (kuai4 dao1 = sharp-knife). 爽快 (shuang3 kuai4 = non-sticky-quick/frank) person 快人快語 (kuai4 ren2 kuai4 yu3 = straightforward-person-straightforward-words = does not mince words).

快 = soothing pleasure: 凉快 (liang2 kuai4 = cool-pleasant), 快樂 (kuai4 le4 = pleasure-joy/happiness), 不快 (bu4 kuai4 = no-happy = dismay). 快活 (kuai4 huo2 = pleasure-live) describes cheerful/non-worrying/gay attitude/life-style.

快 = enjoyable/elation. 吃個痛快 (chi4 ge4 tong4 kuai4 = eat~a-pain-enjoy) = eat to heart’s content. Winning Wimbledon championship is 一生快事 (yi1 sheng1 kuai4 shi4 = one-life-pleasant-event = joy of a life-time). Taking luxury cruise -- 不亦快哉! (bu4 yi4 kuai4 zai1 = no-also-pleasure-ah) = Doesn’t that make you feel wonderful?

by Diana Yue