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 barbecues

串
Putonghua pronunciation: chuan4
Cantonese pronunciation: chuen3
Meanings: string, strand, connect, kebab

Pictogram 串 means string/strand/connect: 串钱 (yi1 chuan4 qian2 = one-string-of-coins), 花串 (hua1 chuan4 = flower-strand/wreath), 串珠 (yi1 chuan4 zhu1 = a-string-of-beads/pearls).
Highway accident causes 串 (yi1 lian2 chuan4 = a-string-of) car-crashes. Housewives 串门子 (chuan4 men2 zi0 = connect-doors-diminutive = paying house visits) to pick up gossip.

Star 串演 (chuan4 yan3 = leads-acts) drama parts, sometimes 客串 (ke4 chuan4 = guest-act = plays guest roles). Generals 串谋 (chuan4 mou2 = together-conspire) to topple Fuhrer. In China’s Cultural Revolution, Red Guards travel around country to 大串连 (da4 chuan4 lian2 = big-string-connect = join other Red Guards).

Barbecues serve 烤肉串 (kao3 rou4 chuan4 = grilled-meat-strings = kebabs), e.g. 羊肉串 (yang2 rou4 chuan4 = lamb-kebabs).

by Diana Yue