

Character Builder 您好嗎？

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 canines

Putonghua pronunciation: *yao3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *ngaau5*

Meanings: snap, bite, gnaw, clasp, grip, lock

咬 (口 *kou3*, mouth + 交 *jiao1*, cross/hit) means bite/clasp/lock. Wolves attack prey: 咬傷 (*yao3 shang1* = bite-and~wound them), 咬死 (*yao3 si3* = bite-them-to~death), 咬住不放 (*yao3 zhu3 bu4 fang4* = bite~steady~no~release = bite, grip, won't let go).

Singer polishes 咬字 (*yao3 zi4* = bite~words = diction). Gossipers 咬耳朵 (*yao3 er3 duo1* = bite~ear = whisper into each other's ears). Poets/pedants 咬文嚼字 (*yao3 wen2 jue2 zi4* = bite~writing~chew~words = fuss about choice of words). 牙尖嘴利 (*ya2 jian1 zui3 li4* = teeth~pointed~mouth~sharp) = sharp-tongued.

Husband 一口咬定 (*yi1 kou3 yao3 ding4* = one~mouth~bite~fixed = unhesitatingly/firmly avers) wife's infidelity. She 反咬一口 (*fan3 yao3 yi1 kou3* = back~bite~one~mouth = counter-accuses him) of maltreatment.

by Diana Yue