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 circuses

熊
Putonghua pronunciation: xiong2
Cantonese pronunciation: hung4
Meanings: bear

熊 (radical 火 huo3, fire) means bears: 棕熊 (zong1 xiong2 = brown-bears), 黑熊 (hei1 xiong2 = black-bears), 灰熊 (hui1 xiong2 = grey-bear = grizzlies), 北極熊 (bei3 ji2 xiong2 = north-extreme-bear = polar bears), 樹熊 (shu4 xiong2 = tree-bear = koalas). 虎背熊腰 (hu3 bri4 xiong2 yao1 = tiger’s-back-bear’s-waist) describes burly chap.

Kids love 熊貓 (xiong2 mao1 = bear-cat = pandas), 泰迪熊 (ta4 di2 xiong2 = “teddy”-transliterated-bear = teddy bears). 熊市 (xiong2 shi4 = bear/bearish-market) is opposite of 牛市 (niu2 shi4 = bull/bullish-market).

熊抱 (xiong2 bao4 = bear-embrace) = bear-hug. Circus bears can 人立 (ren2 li4 = man-stand = stand up like humans), 騎單車 (qi2 dan1 che1 = ride-single-cart = ride bicycles).

by Diana Yue