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 manipulating stockmarkets

鱷
Putonghua pronunciation: e4
Cantonese pronunciation: ngok6
Meanings: crocodile, alligator, caiman

Chinese call crocodiles 鱷 (radical 魚 yü2, fish), 鱷魚 (e4 yü2 = crocodile-fish). Actually crocs are 爬行動物 (pa2 xing2 dong4 wu4 = crawl-walk-moving-thing = reptiles). 長吻鱷 (chang2 wen3 e4 = long-muzzle-croc) = crocodile, 短吻鱷 (duan3 wen3 e4 = short-muzzle-croc) = alligator.

Women love 鱷魚皮手袋 (e4 yü2 pi2 shou3 dai4 = crocodile-skin-hand-bags). Chinese use 鱷魚肉 (e4 yü2 rou4 = crocodile-meat) in medicine and soups.

Crocodiles are 食肉獸 (shi2 rou4 shou4 = eat-meat-animal = carnivores), hence Hongkong terms 大鱷 (da4 e4 = big-croc = powerful/ruthless speculator), 鱷魚潭 (e4 yü2 tan2 = croc-pool = dangerous investment/gambling place that swallows losers alive while winners shed 鱷魚淚 e4 yü2 lei4 = crocodile-tears).

by Diana Yue