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 insects

### 蟻

**Putonghua pronunciation:** ying 2  
**Cantonese pronunciation:** ying 4  
**Meanings:** fly

蒻蠅 (cang1 ying2 = dark-green/blue-fly = house flies), 蚊子 (wen3 zi0 = mosquitoes), 白蟻 (bai2 yi3 = white-ant = termites), 血吸蟲 (xue4 xi1 chong2 = blood-sucking-insect = blood-flukes), 蟑螂 (zhang1 lang2 = cockroaches), 虱 (shi1 = lice) are harmful insects. Fly’s 蟻 (qu1 = larva/maggot) also means disgusting/despicable person.

嗡嗡 (weng1 weng1) is Chinese onomatopoeia for fly’s buzzing. 
Small businesses earn 蟻頭小利 (ying2 tou2 xiao3 li4 = fly’s-head-small-profit = tiny bit of profit). 蟻頭小字 (ying2 tou2 xiao3 zi4 = fly’s-head-small-words/characters) means tiny words written in fine brushstrokes.

蒻拍 (ying2 pai1 = fly-swatters) kill flies. However, Cantonese expression 拍烏蠅 (paak3 woo1 ying4 = swatting-black-flies) means shop’s/firm’s business is terrible (employees are idly swatting flies).

*by Diana Yue*