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 hunting

Putonghua pronunciation: bu3
Cantonese pronunciation: bo6
Meanings: catch, apprehend, arrest, capture


Policeman 追捕 (zhu1 bu3 = chase-catch = pursues) criminal. Tabloids 捕風捉影 (bu3 feng1 zhuo1 ying3 = catch-wind-grab-shadow = catch/spread rumors). Idiom 螳螂捕蟬, 黃雀在後 (tang2 lang2 bu3 chan2, huang2 que1 zai4 hou4 = praying-mantis-hunts-cicada, yellow-bird/qing2-xu2-is-behind) describes game of deceit/chase: predator hunts prey, unaware of dangerous bigger predator.

Da Vinci 捕捉 (bu3 zhuo1 = caught-captured) Mona Lisa’s smile. Salinger wrote 麥田捕手 (mai4 tian2 bu3 shou3 = wheat/rye-field-catch-hand = Catcher in the Rye).