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 Achilles

Putonghua pronunciation: fa2
Cantonese pronunciation: fat6
Meanings: hack, fell, cut down, chop, kill, invade, attack

Ideogram 伐 shows 丿 (= 人 ren2, person) hacked by 戈 (ge1, lance). 砍伐 (kan3 fa2 = chop-hack) = hacking trees/people. 伐木丁丁 (fa2 mu4 zheng1 zheng1 = chop-wood/trees-“zheng”~“zheng”) describes sound of woodsman’s axe attacking trees.

In Chinese history, powerful 秦 (Qin2) 征伐 (zheng1 fa2 = march-invade = launched military expeditions against) 六国 (liu4 guo2 = six-other-states), wiped them out. Historians 口誅筆伐 (kou3 zhu1 bi3 fa2 = mouth-condemn-pen-attack = condemned it in speech and writing).

Homer described Greek queen 海倫 (Hai3 Lun2 = “Helen”-transliterated)'s elopement with Trojan prince 巴里斯 (Ba1 Li3 Si1 = “Paris”-transliterated). Greeks 攻伐 (gong1 fa2 = attacked-invaded) Troy. On battlefield, 殺伐盈盈 (sha1 fa2 ying2 er3 = kill-hack-fill-ears = war cries resounded).

by Diana Yue