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 ancient fables

蝉 Putonghua pronunciation: chan2 Cantonese pronunciation: sin4
Meanings: cicada

蝉 (radical 虫, chong2, insect/bug) = cicada. 蝉鸣 (chan2 ming2 = cicada's-buzzing) announces summer. 薄如蝉翼 (bo2 ru2 chan2 yi4 = thin-as-cicada's-wings) describes extremely thin/light fabric. 嗥若寒蝉 (jin4 ruo2 han2 chan2 = silenced-like-chilled/shivering-cicada) describes scared-stiff/speechless person.

Predator 緊跟 (jin3 gen1 = tightly-follow = stalks) prey. 蝉 is stalked by 蟑螂 (tang2 lang2 = praying-mantis), which is stalked by 黄雀 (huang2 que1 = yellow-bird), which is stalked by boy with 弹弓 (tan2 gong1 = bounce-bow = sling).

Fable 蟑螂捕蝉, 黄雀在後 (tang2 lang2 bu4 chan2, huang2 que1 zai4 hou4 = praying-mantis-hunts-cicada, yellow-bird-is/stalks-behind) describes predator-prey relationship in food-cycle, or strategy of 後發制人 (hou4 fa1 zhi4 ren2 = later-start-capture-people = post-emptive) strike.

by Diana Yue