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

攻
Putonghua pronunciation: gong1
Cantonese pronunciation: gung1
Meanings: attack, offensive, aggression

攻 (radical 工 gong1, work) originally meant engineering works for attacking city, now means 攻打 (gong1 da3 = attack-assail). Lions 圍攻 (wei2 gong1 = surround-and-attack) prey. Boxer launches 攻勢 (gong1 shi4 = attack-force = wave of attack). 攻心 (gong1 xin1 = attack-heart) = use psychological, persuasive tactics.

用火攻 (yong4 huo3 gong1 = use-fire-attack) = burn enemy's camp/ships. 以毒攻毒 (yi3 du2 gong1 du2 = with-poison-attack-poison) = fight nasty enemy with nasty means.

Homer described siege of Troy: Achilles 攻擊 (gong1 ji1 = attacked-assailed), slew Trojan warrior Hector. Greeks 攻城 (gong1 cheng2 = attacked-city), Trojans 守城 (shou3 cheng2 = defended city). Troy 久攻不下 (jiu3 gong1 bu4 xia4 = long-attack-no-fall = did not fall despite drawn-out attacks).

by Diana Yue