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 O.

This week: Words about abusive language

狗
Putonghua pronunciation: gou3
Cantonese pronunciation: gau2
Meaning: dog, hound

狗 = 犬 (qüan3, dog): 公狗 (gong1 gou3 = male-dog), 母狗 (mu3 gou3 = female-dog), 小狗 (xia3 gou3 = little-dogs/pups). 汪汪 (wang1 wang1) describes 狗吠 (gou3 fei4 = dog's-barking).

Anyone despised/condemned is 狗: 狼心狗肺 (lang2 xin1 gou3 fei4 = wolf-heart-dog-lungs) = Cruel/vicious! 狗屁不通 (gou3 pi4 bu4 tong1 = dog-fart-not-reasonable) = Nonsense/rubbish! 狗娘養的 (gou3 niang2 yang3 de0 = dog-mother-raised) = Son-of-a-bitch! 狗官 (gou3 guan1 = dog-official) = Despicable bureaucrat! 兜群狗黨 (hu2 qün2 gou3 dang3 = foxes-group-dogs-party) = band of scoundrels!

狡兔死, 走狗烹 (jiao3 tu4 si3, zou3 gou3 gou3 peng1 = sly-hare-dead, running-dog-cooked) describes cruel leader: he kills Crushers/devours lackeys/followers after they hounded down enemies for him.

by Diana Yue