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

盾 (dun4), Cantonese pronunciation: tun5
Meanings: shield

盾 (= 盾牌 dun4 pai2 = shield-plate = shield) can ward off 矛 (mao2, spear), 剣 (jian4, sword), 箭 (jian4, arrows). 後盾 (hou4 dun4 = back-shield) means supporting force behind operation.

Warrior boasts of having strongest spear and shield. Sage asks: What if I 以子之矛攻子之盾 (yi3 zhi3 zhi1 mao2 gong1 zhi3 zhi1 dun4 = with~your~spear~attack~your~shield)? Hence 矛盾 (mao2 dun4 = spear-shield) means contradiction/contradictory: 自相矛盾 (zi4 xiang1 mao2 dun4 = self-contradicting), 前後矛盾 (qian2 ho4 mao2 dun4 = early-later-contradict = illogical). Rival groups 有矛盾 (you3 mao2 dun4 = have~contradiction = harbor differences/antagonisms/grudges).

Homer described beautiful shield of Achilles: 盾面 (dun4 mian4 = shield’s-upper-face) showed natural elements, cities, people working, dancing, tending animals.

by Diana Yue