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

足 Putonghua pronunciation: zu2
Cantonese pronunciation: juk1
Meanings: foot, feet

足 = 腳 (jiao3, foot/feet): 足跡 (zu2 zhi1 = foot-prints), 足球 (zu2 qiu2 = foot-ball), 赤腳 (chi4 jiao3 = bare-footed), 腳跟 (jiao3 gen1 = foot-heel = heel). Brothers/buddies/colleagues call each other 手足 (shou3 zu2 = hands-and-feet).

Feet/legs’ movements (radical 足) include 跳 (tiao4, jump), 踢 (ti4, kick), 跪 (gui4, kneel). 手舞足蹈 (shou3wu3zu2 dao3 = hands-wave-feet-dance) describes overwhelmed person’s ecstatic gestures.

Homer described death of Achilles: Achilles’ body was 刀槍不入 (dao1 qiang1 bu4 ru4 = knife-spear-no-enter = impenetrable by weapons), but a fatal arrow shot into Achilles’ heel, his 唯一弱點 (wei2 yi1 ruo4 dian3 = only-soft/fatal-spot). 練門 (lian4 men2 = practice-door/hole/leak = vulnerable/weak spot) in Chinese kungfu means roughly the same.

by Diana Yue