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 abusive language

Putonghua pronunciation: chun3
Cantonese pronunciation: chun2
Meaning: stir, stupid, foolish, dumb, dull, clumsy, vulgar

蠢 (chun1, springtime + two 虫 chong2, worm) suggests insects 蠹动 (chun3 dong4 = clumsy-move = stirring) in springtime. Ambitious invaders/investors 蠟蠢欲動 (chun3 chun3 yu4 dong4 = clumsy-clumsy-desire-move = feel urge to make moves).

Synonyms 蠢 and 笨 (ben4) carry despising/mocking tone: 愚蠢 (yu2 chun3 = foolish-stupid) person is called 蠟材 (chun3 cai2 = dumb-material), 笨蛋 (ben4 dan4 = stupid-egg), 蠟验 (chun3 lue2 = stupid-ass), 蠡猪 (chun3 zhu1 = dumb-pig). 蠡胖 (chun3 pang1 = stupid-fat) = obese and dumb-looking.

蠢人 (chun3 ren2 = stupid-guy) 做蠢事 (zuo4 chun3 shi4 = do-stupid-things = commits follies), 說蠢話 (shuo1 chun3 hua4 = says-foolish-words/things), then yells: “我真蠢!”

by Diana Yue