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 borrowing arrows

箭
Putonghua pronunciation: jian4
Cantonese pronunciation: jin3
Meanings: arrow

Archer uses 弓箭 (gong1 jian = bow-arrow), aims at 箭靶 (jian4 ba3 = arrow-target/mark). Enemy fears 毒箭 (du2 jian4 = poisoned-arrow), 放冷箭 (fang4 leng3 jian4 = send-cold-arrow = sudden/unexpected shot/attack).

In signage, 箭頭 (jian4 tou2 = arrow-head) indicates direction. 箭步 (jian4 bu4 = arrow-step) = step/dart forward. 箭豬 (jian4 zhu1 = arrow-pig) = hedgehog/porcupine. 太空火箭 (tai4 kong1 huo3 jian4 = ultimate-void-fire-arrow) = space rocket. 萬箭穿心 (wan4 jian4 chuan1 xin1 = ten-thousand-arrows-pierce-heart) describes truly hurting grief.

蜀 (Shu2) Kingdom and 吳 (Wu2) Kingdom have assembled battleships. Big battle against 魏 (Wei4) Kingdom 如箭在弦 (ru2 jian4 zai4 xian2 = resemble-arrow-on-bow-string), 不得不發 (bu4 de2 bu4 fa1 = no-allow-no-go = must go ahead).

by Diana Yue