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: huai4
Cantonese pronunciation: waai6
Meaning: bad, naughty, wrong, rot, deteriorate, collapse, spoil, ruin

壞 (radical 土 tu3, earth) means 腐壞 (fu4 huai4 = rot/decay-turn-bad), 變壞 (bian4 huai4 = turn-bad/astray). 壞蛋 (huai4 dan4 = bad/rotten-egg = scoundrel) has 壞心腸 (huai4 xin1 chang2 = bad-heart-intestines = evil heart/intentions). 細胞壞死 (xi4 bao1 huai4 si3 = small-cell-bad-die = cells’ premature death = necrosis) results in 壞腿 (huai4 tui3 = bad/maimed-leg).

Parents 教壞 (jiao1 huai4 = teach-bad/wrong-things), so kids 學壞 (xue2 huai4 = copy/pick-up-bad-habits). Bad son 敗壞家聲 (bai4 huai4 jia1 sheng1 = ruins-spoils-family-reputation).

壞人 (huai4 ren2 = bad-person) 說壞話 (shuo1 huai4 huai4 = says-bad-words = spreads gossip/rumors/scandals), 做壞事 (zuo4 huai4 shi4 = do-bad-things = commit follies/errors/crimes), 搞破壞 (gao3 po4 huai4 = stir-break-ruin = create discontent/damage).