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

獲 (huo4) has radical 亻 (= animals). 獵獲物 (lie4 huo4 wu4 = hunt-gain-thing) = hunted-down prey. Diligence brings 收獲 (shou1 huo4 = gather-in-gain = gain/return). 獲 ’s homonym 獲 (huo4, radical 禾 huo2, padi shoot) means harvest.

Fastest runner 獲勝 (huo4 sheng4 = get-win = gains victory), 獲獎 (huo4 jiang3 = gets-prize). Unlucky competitor 一無所獲 (yi1 wu2 suo3 huo4 = one-none-’s-gain = gets nothing).

蜀 (Shu2) Kingdom’s battleships sailed on fog-shrouded 長江 (Chang2 Jiang1 = long-river = the Yangtze River), lured 魏 (Wei4) Kingdom’s archers to 射箭 (she4 jian4 = shoot-arrows), 獲得 (huo4 de2 = gained-acquired) 130,000 arrows, were determined to 大獲全勝 (da4 huo4 quan2 sheng4 = big-gain-whole-victory = win complete/overwhelming victory) in forthcoming battle.

by Diana Yue