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 canines

狗 (radical 犭 = 犬 qūn3, dog) include 野狗 (ye3 gou3 = wild-dogs), 家犬 (jia1 qūn3 = domestic-dogs), 獵狗 (lie4 gou3 = hunting-hounds), 警犬 (jing3 qūn3 = police-dogs), 傾盲犬 (dao3 mang3 qūn3 = guide-blind-dog = seeing eye dogs).

公狗 (gong1 gou3 = grandpa/male-dog) and 母狗 (mu3 gou3 = mother/female-dog) produce 小狗 (xiao3 gou3 = little-dogs/pups). Vets 閻狗 (yan1 gou3 = spay/neuter-dogs).

狗 suggests contempt/derision. 走狗 (zou3 gou3 = running-dog) = lackey. 狗屁不通 (gou3 pi4 bu4 tong1 = dog-fart-not-reasonable) describes ill-founded/ridiculous arguments. 狗娘養的! (gou3 niang2 yang3 deo0 = dog-mother-raised) = You sonuvabitch! Shallow/contemptuous snobs 狗眼看人低 (gou3 yan3 kan4 ren2 di1 = dog’s-eyes-look-at-people-low = can’t gauge/appreciate other people’s full stature/merits).

by Diana Yue