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 hams

Putonghua pronunciation: yan1
Cantonese pronunciation: yim1
Meanings: salt, cure, marinate, pickle, preserve, salt

醃 has radical 酉 (you3, wine/wine-urn). 酉 is radical of 醋 (cu4, vinegar), 醬 (jiang4, thick seasoning paste), 醃 (yan1, soak, seep, marinate, cure, pickle), 醇 (jiao4, ferment), 醋 (rang4, brew), 酒 (jiu3, wine, alcohol, liquor, liqueur), 醉 (zui4, drunken). Vineyards 醋酒 (rang4 jiu3 = brew-wine).


火腿 (huo3 tui3 = fire-leg = hams) are salted/cured/wind-dried. 醃鹹魚 (yan1 xian2 yu2 = marinate-salty-fish = make salt fish by inserting salt and sun-drying) is also slangy expression meaning going without shower/bath, therefore smelling of body sweat/odour.

by Diana Yue