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

狼 (radical 犭 = 犬 qūan3, dog) and 狗 (gou3, dogs) are cousins. 狼狗 (lang2 gou3 = wolf-dog) = wolfhound. 狼狈 (lang2 bei4 = wolf and clumsy short-legged wolf) describes people in embarrassing situations, e.g. rain-soaked. However, 狼狈為奸 (lang2 bei4 wei2 jian1 = wolf-short-legged-wolf-are-evil) describes villains helping each other in crime.

Wolves are 兇狠 (xiong1 hen3 = fierce-cruel). 如狼似虎 (ru2 lang2 si4 hu3 = like-wolf-resemble-tiger) = fiercely feeding/predating. 狼子野心 (lang2 zi3 ye3 xin1 = wolf-son-wild/disobedient-heart) describes ungrateful person turning against benefactor.


Putonghua pronunciation: lang2
Cantonese pronunciation: long4
Meanings: wolf

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