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

咬 (yao3)
Cantonese pronunciation: ngaau5
Meanings: snap, bite, gnaw, grip, lock

咬 (kou3, mouth + 交 jiao1, cross/hit) means bite/clasp/lock. Wolves attack prey: 咬傷 (yao3 shang1 = bite-and-wound them), 咬死 (yao3 si3 = bite-them-to-death), 咬住不放 (yao3 zhu3 bu4 fang4 = bite-steady-no-release = bite, grip, won’t let go).

Singer polishes 咬字 (yao3 zi4 = bite-words = diction). Gossipers 咬耳朵 (yao3 er3 duo1 = bite-ear = whisper into each other’s ears). Poets/pedants 咬文嚼字 (yao3 wen2 jüe2 zi4 = bite-writing-chew-words = fuss about choice of words). 牙尖嘴利 (ya2 jian1 zui3 li4 = teeth-pointed-mouth-sharp) = sharp-tongued.

Husband 一口咬定 (yi1 kou3 yao3 ding4 = one-mouth-bite-fixed = unhesitantly/firmly avers) wife’s infidelity. She 反咬一口 (fan3 yao3 yi1 kou3 = back-bite-one-mouth = counter-accuses him) of maltreatment.

by Diana Yue