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

Putonghua pronunciation: hen3
Cantonese pronunciation: han2
Meanings: fierce, cruel, pitiless

Characters 狼 (lang2, wolf) and 狠 share radical 犭 (= 犬 qūan3, dog). 狠, short of 狼 (wolf) by just one dot, means兇狠 (xiong1 hen3 = fierce-cruel), like wolves.


狠 also means fiercely/forcefully/unreservedly. Released prisoner 狠吃一頓 (hen3 chi1 yi1 dun4 = eats to his heart’s content). Lucky speculator 狠賺一筆 (hen3 zhuan4 yi1 bi3 = greatly-earn/win-one-amount = rakes in a big sum). Desperate grifter 狠賭一局 (hen3 du3 yi1 ju2 = recklessly-gamble-one-round = risks big stakes in one go).

by Diana Yue