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 witches

Putonghua pronunciation: zhou4
Cantonese pronunciation: jau3
Meanings: curse, spell, abuse, swear, revile

咒 (radical 口 kou3, mouth) originally meant 祝 (zhu1, bless), now means curse. Irritated person 咒骂 (zhou4 ma4 = curses-blames) weather/traffic. Bitter person 咒詛 (zhou4 zu3 = curses-condemns) enemy.

咒語 (zhou4 yu3 = curse-words) means magical utterances bearing blessing/curse. Priests/shamans 咒 (nian4 zhou4 = chant-blessing/curse = pronounce magical utterances) to 驅魔 (qü1 mo2 = expel/exorcise-demons), 治病 (zhi4 bing4 = cure-diseases).

符咒 (fu2 zhou4 = charm-curse = magical charms) are 符 (fu2, paper charms) written with magical 咒語 (zhou4 yu3 = blessing/curse-words/symbols). 下咒 (xia4 zhou4 = descend/cast-curse) means casting magical spell on person/place. Victim of 毒咒 (du2 zhou4 = poisonous/vicious-curse) gets 咒死 (zhou4 si3 = cursed-to-death) unless he can 解咒 (jie3 zhou4 = untie-curse = undo the curse).

by Diana Yue