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 horses

鞭 Putonghua pronunciation: bian1
Cantonese pronunciation: bin1
Meaning: whip, lash, spur

鞭 (radical革ge2, leather) = 鞭子 (bian1 zi0 = whip-diminutive = whip): 马鞭 (ma3 bian1 = horse-whip), 皮鞭 (pi2 bian1 = leather-whip), 鞭打 (bian1 da3 = whip-beat = inflict whipping), 鞭缝 (bian1 ta4 = whip-beat/inflict physically/verbally). However, 牛鞭 (niu2 bian1 = bull’s-whip) = bull’s penis.

Jailer wields 藤鞭 (teng2 bian1 = cane-whip), 鞭笞 (bian1 chi1 = whips-canes) prisoner. Dead dictator gets 鞭屍 (bian1 shi1 = whip-corpses = condemned/purged after death).

執教鞭 (zhi2 jiao4 bian1 = take-up-teacher’s-whip) = work as teacher. Stern teacher 鞭策 (bian1 ce4 = whip-push = severely spurs) students on, but sometimes 鞭長莫及 (bian1 chang2 mo4 ji2 = whip-long-cannot-reach = despite reaching out, object of outreach/attack is too far off).

by Diana Yue