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: qū3
Cantonese pronunciation: kui1
Meanings: force, drive, order about, expel, banish

驅 (radical 馬 ma3, horse) means drive: 驅馬 (qū3 ma3 = drive-horse = ride horse), 驅車 (qū3 che1 = drive-car). Cowboy 驅趕 (qū3 gan3 = drives-chases) cattle. 驅動力 (qū3 dong4 li4 = thrust) pushes machines.


Rubbing 驅風油 (qū3 feng1 you2 = drive-wind-oil = mint-camphor oil-like thickened concoction) on skin relieves headaches/rheumatism. 驅魔人 (qū1 mo2 ren2 = expel-demons- person = exorcist) 喊咒 (nian4 zhou4 = chant-curse = pronounced magical utterances) to save demon-possessed victim.

by Diana Yue