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 the gangsters

惡 (radical 心 xin1, heart) = bad/ill-intentioned: 兇惡 (xiong1 e4 = fierce-bad), 惡毒 (e4 du2 = evil-poisonous). 惡霸 (e4 ba4 = bad-bullies) are 惡人 (e4 ren2 = fierce/bad people). 惡魔 (e4 mo2 = evil-demons/devils) appear in 惡夢 (e4 meng4 = bad-dreams = nightmares).

Some 惡性腫瘤 (e4 xing4 zhong3 liu2 = bad-nature-swollen-tumor = malignant tumors/cancers) 惡化 (e4 hua4 = bad-transform = worsen). 惡性循環 (e4 xing4 xun2 huan2 = bad-nature-follow-rotate) = vicious circle.

Gangsters 無惡不作 (wu2 e4 bu4 zuo4 = no-evil-not-do = commit all kinds of crimes) to expand their 惡勢力 (e4 shi4 li4 = criminal-powers-influences). Eventually, 惡有惡報 (e4 you3 e4 bao4 = bad-has-bad-repay = evil catches up with evil-doers).

by Diana Yue