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 stupid search

Putonghua pronunciation: chun3
Cantonese pronunciation: chun2
Meanings: stupid, dumb

Pictogram 蠹 shows 春 (chun1, spring) over two 虫 (= 蟲 chong2, bugs/worms). 蠕動 (chun3 dong4 = dumb-move) describes bugs stirring in springtime. 蠕蠕欲動 (chun3 chun3 yu4 dong4 = dumb-dumb-desire-move/act) describes restless/ambitious factions stirring/contemplating to act.

Fools are 愚蠢 (yu2 chun3 = slow-witted-dumb). Boss shouts at employee: “蠢才!” (chun3 cai2 = stupid-talent = “You dumb bloke!”) 蠕蠕 (chun3 lu2 = dumb-ass), 蠕猪 (chun3 zhu1 = dumb-pig), 蠕货 (chun3 huo4 = dumb-commodity) all mean “Stupid!”

蠢人 (chun3 ren2 = stupid-people) often do 蠕事 (chun3 shi4 = stupid-things). Cantonese cheeky saying 人蠢無藥醫 (ren2 chun2 wu2 yao4 yi1 = person-stupid-no-medicine-cure) means there’s no way you can enlighten a stupid guy and make him improve.

by Diana Yue