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 marine life

殼

Putonghua pronunciation: ke2
Cantonese pronunciation: hok3
Meanings: shell

Animals' bodies are protected by 皮 (pi2, skin), 毛 (mao2, hair/fur), 甲 (jia3, carapace/armor), 殼 (ke2, shell), 鱗 (lin2, scales). Fish have 魚鱗 (yu2 lin2 = fish-scales). Nuts have 硬殼 (ying4 ke2 = hard-shells).

Shellfish are 海產 (hai3 chan3 = sea-products). 甲殼類 (jia3 ke2 lei4 = armor-shell-species = crustaceans) include 蟹 (xie4, crabs), 蝦 (xia1, shrimps/prawns), 龍蝦 (long2 xia1 = dragon-shrimp = lobsters). 貝類 (bei4 lei4 = seashell-species) include 蛤 (bang4, clams), 螃 (xian4, basket clams), 鮑魚 (bao4 yu2 = abalone), 牡蠣 (mu3 li4 = oysters), 扇貝 (shan4 bei4 = fan-seashell = scallops).

金蟬脱殼 (jin1 chan2 tuo1 ke2 = gold-cicada-disconnect-shell) means cicada molting or strategy of slipping away cleverly from eyes/control of opponent.

by Diana Yue