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 short lives

蟲
Putonghua pronunciation: chong2
Cantonese pronunciation: chung2
Meaning: worm, bug, insect, addict

蟲 (radical 虫 chong2, worm) = worm/bug/insect. Bees are 益蟲 (yi1 chong2 = useful/good-insects), locusts are 害蟲 (hai4 chong2 = harmful-insects). 毛蟲 (mao2 chong2 = hairy-worm) = caterpillar. 防蟲劑 (fang2 chong2 ji1 = prevent-bugs-agent) = insect repellent.


Chinese poets 以蟲鳴秋 (yi1 chong2 ming2 qiu1 = use-insects-sound-autumn = use insects’ buzzing to suggest autumn’s arrival). But sage says: 夏蟲不可以語冰 (xia4 chong2 bu4 ke2 yi3 yu3 bing1 = summer-insect-no-can-to-talk-ice): Insects have short life-span, can’t survive winter, it’s no use telling them what ice means — Ignorant people can’t understand big concepts.

by Diana Yue