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 insects

虫 (虫's simplified form) as character’s radical may indicate insect (蚤 zao1, flea), reptile (蛇 she2, snake), mammal (蝙蝠 bian1 fu2, bat). Colloquially, 大虫 (da4 chong2 = big-worm) means tiger.

昆蟲 (kun1 chong2 = insect)'s 卵 (luan3 = egg) hatches into 幼蟲 (you4 chong2 = young-insect-larva/caterpillar), becomes 蟲蛹 (chong2 yong3 = insect-pupa), 蛹變 (tui4 bian4 = molt-change = metamorphoses) into 成蟲 (cheng2 chong3 = adult).

殺蟲劑 (sha1 chibg2 ji1 = kill-insects-potion = insecticides/pesticides) kill 害蟲 (hai4 chong2 = harmful-insects/pests). 百足之蟲, 死而不僵 (bai2 zhu1 zhi1 chong2, si3 er2 bu2 jiang1 = hundred-legs~'s-worm, dies~but-not-stiff) warns that powerful enemies/entities hit by killing blows may still have lingering breath/strength (to rebound).

by Diana Yue