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 spring weather

湿 (radical 氵 = water shui3, water) means damp/humid: 湿润 (shi1 run4 = damp/moist) weather, 湿度 (shi1 du4 = damp-degree = humidity), 湿地 (shi1 di2 = wet-lands). Rain-soaked person is 湿透 (shi1 tou4 = wet-through). 抽湿机 (chou1 shi1 ji1 = suck-wet-machine) = dehumidifier.

潮湿 (chao2 shi1 = damp-wet) spring weather is called 回南 (hui2 nan2 = return-south = return of south-wind/damp-air). 湿气重 (shi1 qi4 zhong4 = damp-breath-heavy = damp) environments cause 風濕 (feng1 shi1 = wind-damp = rheumatism). Drinking 凉茶 (liang2 cha2 = cool-tea = Chinese herbal concoction) suppresses body’s 湿熱 (shi1 ri4 = damp-heat).

湿吻 (shi1 wen3 = wet-kiss) = French kiss. Cantonese term 鹹濕 (haam4 sap1 = Pinyin xian2 shi1) describes lewd/horny thoughts/actions/men.

by Diana Yue