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

瘟 (radical 疟 ne4 = 病 bing4, illness) means 急性傳染病 (ji2 xing4 chuan2 ran3 bing4 = urgent-nature-pass-on-stain-illness = acute contagious disease). 瘟疫 (wen1 yi4 = epidemics-plagues) include 鼠疫 (shu3 yi4 = rats-epidemic = bubonic plague), 天花 (tian1 hua1 = sky-flower = smallpox), 登革熱 (deng1 ge2 ri4 = “dengue”-transliterated-fever), 流感 (liu2 gan3 = flow/contagious-infect = influenza).

Farmers fear 豬瘟 (zhu1 wen1 = pig-fever = hog cholera), 雞瘟 (ji1 wen1 = chicken-pest), a kind of 禽流感 (qin2 liu2 gan3 = bird-influenza = bird/avian flu).

Stupid guys are 瘟頭瘟腦 (wen1 tou2 wen1 nao3 = fever-head-fever-brain = dense). 送瘟神 (song4 wen1 shen2 = send-off-epidemic-god) means exorcising/banishing epidemic demon or much-hated person.

by Diana Yue