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 humidity

潮 (radical氵 = water shui3 = water)
Putonghua pronunciation: chao2
Cantonese pronunciation: chiu4
Meanings: tide, humid, damp, moist, wet
潮 = 潮濕 (chao2 shi1 = damp-humid). Biscuits which 潮了 (chao2 le0 = damp-ed) are soggy. 潮氣 (shi1 qi4 = damp-gas/air = humidity) spoils electronic appliances, breeds 霉菌 (mei2 jun1 = molds-fungus). Clothes in chests/closets need 防潮珠 (fang2 chao2 ji1 = prevent-moisture-bead = mothballs).
移民潮 (yi2 min2 chao2 = move-people-tide) = wave of immigration/emigration. Truffaut, Godard are French 新浪潮 (xin1 lang4 chao2 = new-wave-tide = French Nouvelle Vague = New Wave) film-makers.

by Diana Yue