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

霉 (radical 雨 yu3 = rain)
Putonghua pronunciation: mei2
Cantonese pronunciation: mooi4
Meanings: mildew, mold, moldy, unlucky, bad luck

Biologically, 真菌 (zhen1 jun1 = real-fungus = fungi) are divided into 菇菌 (tan2 jun1 = mushroom-fungus = mushrooms), 霉菌 (mei2 jun1 = molds-fungus = molds), 酵母菌 (jiao4 mu3 jun1 = ferment-mother-fungus = yeast).

Molds’ 孢子 (bao1 zi0 = spores) 繁殖 (fan2 zhi2 = multiply-form-colony = multiply) fast, causing 污染 (wu1 ran3 = dirt-stain = pollution) in food/clothes. In 霉雨 (mei2 yu3 = moldy-rain = spring-summer rains) season, unrefrigerated meat/vegetables 霉爛 (mei2 lan4 = mold-break/rot = rot/decay) easily.

Car crash victim laments 霉運 (mei3 yun4 = mold-fortune = bad luck): “我真倒霉!” (wo3 zhen1 dao3 mei2 = I-really-pour-down-mold = “I’m really unlucky!” 發霉 (fa1 mei2 = develop-molds) describes moldy objects or person idling miserably.

by Diana Yue