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

Putonghua pronunciation: huai4
Cantonese pronunciation: waai6
Meanings: bad, deteriorate, rot

壞 means bad: 壞人 (huai4 ren2 = bad/cruel/evil~people), 壞書 (huai4 shu1 = problematic/poorly-written~book), 壞主意 (huai4 zhu3 yi4 = bad-main-meaning = bad/stupid/malicious-idea).

Thugs/crooks are 壞蛋 (huai4 dan4 = bad/rotten-egg). Gossipers 說壞話 (shuo1 huai4 huai4 = say-bad-words) about others.

Verb 壞 means deteriorate/malfunction. Dead body 腐壞 (fu4 huai4 = rot-turn-bad = decays). 壞車 (huai4 che1 = stalled-car) needs fixing. Neglected teenager may 變壞 (bian4 huai4 = change-to-bad = go on the wrong path). Wrong move may 壞事 (huai4 shi4 = spoil-thing = fuck up plan).

Wound causes 細胞壞死 (xi4 bao1 huai4 si3 = small~cell~bad~die = cells’ premature death = necrosis). Son’s infamous behavior 敗壞家聲 (bai4 huai4 jia1 sheng1 = defeat~deteriorate~family~sound = stains/destroys family’s reputation).

by Diana Yue