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 change of weather

丹 (radical 乙 yi3, second) = dry: 乾瘦 (gan1 shou4 = dry-thin/lean), 乾旱 (gan1 han3 = dry-arid/parched). Laundry needs 風乾 (feng1 gan1 rou4 = wind-dried), 曬乾 (sai4 gan1 = sun-dried). Washed face feels 乾凈 (gan1 jing4 = dry-clean = clean), 乾爽 (gan1 shuang3 = dry-crisp).

乾 (autumn's 乾燥 gan1 zao4 = dry-flammable) weather makes crops 枯乾 (ku1 gan1 = wither-dry-up), farmers 乾急 (gan1 ji2 = uselessly/helplessly-agitate). 乾柴烈火 (gan1 cai2 lie4 huo3 = dry-firewood-violent-fire) describes blazing fire, sizzling romance/lust.

乾凰 (gan1 ku1 = dry-weep/cry) = pretend to weep/cry, not shedding tears. 乾笑 (gan1 xiao4 = dry-laugh) = expressionless/feigned-laugh/cackle. 外強中乾 (wai4 qiang2 zhong1 gan1 = outwardly-strong-inwardly-dry) describes family/business keeping impressive façade but already drained empty.

by Diana Yue