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

Putonghua pronunciation: feng1
Cantonese pronunciation: fung1
Meaning: wind, gale, breeze, trend, style, custom

風 (radical 虫 = 蟲 chong2, worms/bugs): 微風 (wei1 feng1 = light-wind/breeze), 強風 (qiang2 feng1 = strong-wind/gale), 風 (jü4 feng1 = huge/giant-wind = typhoon/hurricane). 風車 (feng1 che1 = wind-motor = wind-mills) preceded 風力發電機 (feng1 li4 fa1 dian4 ji1 = wind-power-generate-electricity-machine = wind turbines).

Scholar studies country's 風俗 (feng1 su2 = wind-folk/secular-convention = customs), 風氣 (feng1 qi4 = trend-air/breath = moral trends/culture). 風水師 (feng1 shui3 shi1 = wind-water-master = geomancy/feng-shui master) forecasts 風險 (feng1 xian3 = wind-danger = dangers/risks).

Autumn 刮風 (gua1 feng1 = scrape/blow-wind = gets windy). 秋風起, 三蛇肥 (qi1 feng1 qi3, san1 she2 fei2 = autumn-wind-rises/blows, three-snakes-fat = The autumn breeze reminds gourmets: snakes are fat and in season!)