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 rainstorms

雨
Putonghua pronunciation: yǔ3
Cantonese pronunciation: yue5
Meaning: rain

雨 = rain: 雨天 (yǔ3 tian1 = rainy-day), 雨季 (yǔ3 ji4 = rainy-season), 下雨 (xia4 yǔ3 = down-rain = rain/raining), 微雨 (wei1 yǔ3 = small-rain/drizzle), 酸雨 (suan1 yǔ3 = acid-rain). 暴風雨 (bao4 feng1 yǔ3 = violent-wind-rain) = rainstorm.

Meteorologists study 雨雲 (yǔ3 yun2 = rain-clouds), 雨帶 (yǔ3 dai4 = rain-bands), 降雨量 (jiang4 yǔ3 liang4 = fall-rain-volume = rainfall amount), 人工降雨 (ren2 gong1 jiang4 yǔ3 = human-work-fall-rain = rainmaking/cloud-seeding).

Toppling government/marriage experiences 風風雨雨 (feng1 feng1 yǔ3 yǔ3 = wind-wind-rain-rain = disturbing events/challenges/gossip), Mafia stir up 腥風血雨 (xing1 feng1 xue3 yǔ3 = fishy/stinking-wind-bloody-rain = violence). 雨過天青 (yǔ3 guo4 tian1 qing1 = rain-pass-sky-blue) describes tranquility/happiness after storm/trouble/quarrel is over.

by Diana Yue