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

抖
Putonghua pronunciation: dou3
Cantonese pronunciation: dau2
Meaning: tremble, shiver, quiver, shake, rouse, jerk, jog, enliven, rouse, vibrate

抖 (radical 手 = hand shou3) means 翱抖 (zhan4 dou3 = tremble/vibrate-shake/quiver). In temperature-drop, chilly gusts 抖動 (dou3 dong4 = shake-move/sway) branches, 抖落 (dou3 luo4 = shake-off) leaves, birds 抖鬆 (dou3 song1 = fluff-loose/up) feathers, housewives 抖出 (dou3 chu1 = fumble/heave/turn-out) warm bedding. Investigation 抖出 (dou3 chu1 = shake-out = exposes) misconduct/corruption.

Rider 一抖馬轡 (yi1 dou3 ma3 jiang1 = gives one-jog-to-horse's-reins), horse shoots off. Athlete looks 精神抖撤 (jing1 shen2 dou3 sou3 = essence-spirit-rouse-stir = spritely/energetic). Doctor encourages 發抖 (fa1 dou3 = emit-shiver = shivering) fever-patient: 抖起精神 (dou3 qi3 jing1 shen2 = Brace-up-your-spirit!)

Cantonese 抖 (pronounced “tau2”) means pause/rest. 早抖 (jo2 tau2 = early-rest) means “Good-night!” or, slangily/dismissively, “Get lost!”

by Diana Yue