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

加 [jiā]
Putonghua pronunciation: jia1
Cantonese pronunciation: ga1
Meaning: add, plus, increase

加 (力 [lì], strength + 口 [kǒu], mouth) = add/increase: 加上 (jia1 shang4 = add-on/also/plus), 加速 (jia1 su4 = increase/accelerate speed), 加租 (jia1 zu1 = raise-rent), 加價 (jia1 jia4 = raise-prices), 加油 (jia1 you2 = add-petrol/fill-up tank or “Step it up!”), 加盟 (jia1 meng2 = join-alliance/group/team).

東盟十加三 (dong1 meng2 shi2 jia1 san1 = east-alliance-ten-plus-three) = ASEAN Plus Three = Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus China, Japan, South Korea. 加鹽加醋 (jia1 yan2 jia1 cu4 = add-salt-add-vinegar) describes cook marinating meat 加入 (jia1 ru4 = adding/mixing-in) condiments, or gossiper exaggerating story.

In temperature-drop, 加衣 (jia1 yi1 = add/wear-more-clothes), 加被 (jia1 bei4 = add-blankets), 加餐 (jia1 can1 = add-meal = eat more).

by Diana Yue