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

浸
Putonghua pronunciation: jìn4
Cantonese pronunciation: jam3
Meaning: dip, immerse, submerge, soak, steep, infuse, moisten, flood, baptize


Convert takes 浸禮 (jìn4 lǐ3 = baptism ceremony), 受浸 (shòu4 jìn4 = is baptized), joins 浸信會 (jìn4 xìn4 huì4 = baptize-believe-sect/order = Baptist church).

Rain 浸潤 (jìn4 rùn4 = steep-moisten/enrich = nourishes) vegetation. Well-known Cantonese nursery rhyme begins with “落大雨, 水浸街” (luò4 da4 yù3, shuí3 jìn4 jìe1 = Cantonese “lok6 daai6 yue5, sui2 jam3 gai1 = fall-big-rain, water-drown-street = Heavy rain is falling, the streets are flooded.”).

by Diana Yue