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 climate change

Putonghua pronunciation: qi4
Cantonese pronunciation: hei3
Meaning: breath, gas, air, energy, qi

氣 (radical 氣 qi4, gas) = gas/air. 空氣 (kong1 qi4 = empty-gas = air) contains 氣體 (qi4 ti3 = gas-body = gases): 氧氣 (yang3 qi4 = oxygen-gas), 氫氣 (qing1 qi4 = hydrogen-gas). 大氣層 (da4 qi4 ceng2 = big-gas/air-layer) = atmosphere.

天氣 (tian1 qi4 = sky-air) = weather. When 天朗氣清 (tian1 lang3 qi4 qing1 = sky-sunny-air-clean/pure = weather is fine), grass/flowers emit 香氣 (xiang1 qi4 = aromatic-smell). 氣體 (lǜ4 qi4 = chlorine-gas) compounds deplete 臭氧層 (chou4 yang3 ceng2 = stinking-oxygen-layer = ozone-layer), causing 氣候變化 (qi4 hou4 bian4 hua4 = air/weather-season-change-transform = climate change).

Taoism studies 氣 (qi, energy-flow). 氣功 (qi4 gong1 = breathing/energy-exercises = qi-gong) practitioners 運氣 (yun4 qi4 = summons/moves-internal-energy).

by Diana Yue