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 heat waves**

**熱**

Putonghua pronunciation: re4
Cantonese pronunciation: yit6
Meanings: hot, heat

冷熱 (leng3 re4 = cold-hot) = temperature range. Nurse 探熱 (tan4 re4 = probe-heat = takes invalid’s body temperature). Volunteers have 熱情 (re4 qing2 = hot-feeling = passion), 熱心 (re4 xin1 = hot-heart = zeal/concern).

熱天 (re4 tian1 = hot-sky) = hot weather/days. Fat people 怕熱 (pa4 re4 = fear-hot = dislike/cannot stand hot places), stay in 冷氣間 (leng3 qi4 jian1 = cold-air/gas-space = air-conditioned areas) when 熱浪 (re4 lang4 = hot-wave = heat wave) rages.

Romeo 熱戀 (re4 lian4 = hot-love = passionately loves) Juliet.

熱辣辣 (re4 la4 la4 = hot-spicy-hot-spicy-hot) describes sizzling/spicy-hot food, sexy girls, hot topics. Economists warn: “樓市過熱!” (lou2 shi4 guo4 re4 = building-market-over-hot = “Property market’s overheated!”)

*by Diana Yue*