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: nuan3
Cantonese pronunciation: nuen5
Meaning: warm, warm up

暖 (radical 日 ri4, sun) describes 暖和 (nuan3 he2 = warm-mild) temperature/tone: 暖風 (nuan3 feng1 = warm-breezes), 暖色 (nuan3 se1 = warm-color), 暖壺 (nuan3 hu2 = warm-bottle) = thermos flask.

Friends enjoy 暖烘烘 (nuan3 hong1 hong1 = warm-bake-bake = nice warm) fire, 暖手 (nuan3 shou3 = warm-hands), 暖酒 (nuan3 jiu3 = warm/heat-up-wine). 暖如春 (wen1 nuan3 ru2 chun1 = temperate-warm-resemble-spring) describes temperature or congenial personality.

Depletion of 臭氧層 (chou4 yang3 ceng2 = stinking-oxygen-layer = ozone-layer) makes 氣候變暖 (qi4 hou4 bian4 nuan3 = air/weather-season-change-warm = climate turn warmer). Whales follow ocean's 暖流 (nuan3 liu2 = warm-current).

However, 冷暖人間 (leng3 nuan3 ren2 jian1 = cold-warm-human-area) means life/world is sometimes kind, sometimes unkind.

by Diana Yue