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 Hurricane Sandy

风

Putonghua pronunciation: feng1
Cantonese pronunciation: fung1
Meanings: breeze, wind, gale, style, trend, force

風 = wind/gale: 輕風 (qing1 feng1 = light-breeze), 強風 (qiang2 feng1 = strong-wind), 烈風 (lie4 feng1 = powerful-gale). 旋風 (xuan2 feng1 = whirl-wind/cyclones), 龍捲風 (long2 juan3 feng1 = dragon-roll-wind = tornados) wreak havoc. 薰風 (xun1 feng1 = smoke-wind) = balmy breezes.

Chinese use 風水 (feng1 shui3 = wind-water = geomancy) concepts to predict/improve fortune. Farmers/travelers pray for 順風順水 (shun4 feng1 shun4 shui3 = smooth-running-wind-smooth-running-water = smooth-going year/conditions) without 風險 (feng1 xian3 = wind-danger = risks).

風暴 (feng1 bao4 = wind-violent) = storm. 颱風 (ju4 feng1), sharing pronunciation and meaning with 巨風 (ju4 feng1 = giant-wind), means hurricane/typhoon. New York bore brunt of 颱風 桑迪 (ju4 feng1 Sang1 Di2 = Hurricane-“Sandy”-transliterated) in 2012.

by Diana Yue