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: luan4
Cantonese pronunciation: luen6
Meaning: confuse, untidy, muddle up, disarray, disorganization, rebellion

亂 (radical 乙 yi3, second) = 混亂 (hun4 luan4 = mixed-up- confused/undisciplined). Gluttons 亂吃 (lian4 chi1 = unrestrained-eat). Jaywalkers 亂走 (lian4 zou3 = carelessly/ defying-rules-walk). Bluffers 亂説 (lian4 shuo1 = irresponsibly- speak = bluff/lie). They will 出亂子 (chu1 luan4 zi0 = out- confuse-diminutive = cause/get into trouble).

Dissidents 胡思亂想 (hu2 si1 luan4 xiang3 = barbarian-idea-confused-think = harbor wild/unrealistic thoughts), imagine 作亂 (zuo2 luan4 = make-confusion = rebellion).

氣候變化 (qi4 hou4 bian hua4 = air/weather-season-change-transform = climate change) 搞亂 (gao3 luan4 = disturbs-disrupts) weather patterns. In sudden cold-spell, people 亂穿衣 (lian4 chuan1 yi1 = confused-wear-clothes = put on anything anyhow). Ecologists yell: Our world 亂了套! = luan4 le0 tao4 = confuse-ed-set = is a mess!