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

焦
Putonghua pronunciation: jiao1
Cantonese pronunciation: jiu1
Meanings: scorched, charred, anxious, nervous, irritated

焦 describes 烧焦 (shao1 jiao1 = burnt-charred), 烫焦 (shai4 jiao1 = sun-burnt-charred = scorched) objects: 焦炭 (jiao1 tan4 = burnt-charcoal), 焦糖 (jiao1 tang2 = burnt-sugar = caramel). When market crashes, speculators 焦頭爛額 (jiao1 tou2 lan4 er4 = burnt-head-broken-forehead = suffer heavy blows).

心焦 (xin1 jiao1 = heart-scorched) = 焦急 (jiao1 ji2 = scorched-urgent) = feel impatient. Caged animals get 焦躁 (jiao1 zao4 = impatient-restless). Workers pressed by deadline feel 焦灼 (jiao1 zhuo2 = impatient-boiled = anxious/pressed). Missing child’s parents feel 焦慮 (jiao1 lu4 = impatient-worry = terribly worried).

In war of resistance, using 焦土政策 (jiao1 tu3 zheng4 ce4 = scorched-land-policy-strategy) means burning/destroying everything before retreating so that no resources fall into the invaders’ hands.

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