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

降
Putonghua pronunciation: jiang4
Cantonese pronunciation: gong3
Meanings: lower, fall, descend

降 = fall/descend. 雨 (jiang4 yu3 = fall-rain = coming of rain), 降溫 (jiang4 wen1 = fall-warmth = temperature-drop) end heat-wave. 雪 (jiang4 xue3 = fall-snow) = snowfall. Airplanes 降落 (jiang4 luo4 = descend-fall = land). 降落傘 (jiang4 luo4 san3 = descend-fall-umbrella) = parachute.

升 and 升 (sheng1, rise) are opposites. Businessmen 降低 (jiang4 di1 = lower-low = bring down) expenses to 提升 (ti2 sheng1 = raise-high = raise) company’s gains. Multi-storey buildings have 升降機 (sheng1 jiang4 jil1 = rise-fall-machines = 電梯 dian4 ti1 = electric-ladders = lifts/escalators).

從天而降 (cong2 tian1 er2 jiang4 = from-sky-and-descend) describes person/event’s unexpected coming. Everybody loves 天降橫財 (tian1 jiang4 heng2 cai2 = sky-fall-horizontal-wealth = a Heaven-sent windfall)!

by Diana Yue