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 autumn

收
Putonghua pronunciation: shou1
Cantonese pronunciation: sau1
Meanings: collect, accept, withdraw

收 = bring in. Farmers 收割 (shou1 ge1 = collect-cut = cut/reap) harvest. 收穫 (shou1 huo4 = collect-harvest) = harvest/gain: 豐收 (feng1 shou1 = abundant-harvest), 失收 (shi1 shou1 = failed/poor-harvest).

IRS 收税 (shou1 shui4 = collects-taxes), landlord 收租 (shou1 zu1 = collects-rent). Childless couple 收養 (shou1 yang3 = take-in-feed/raise = adopt) orphan. Connoisseurs 收藏 (shou1 cang2 = take-in-store = collects) antiques. Defeated army, fighting back, 收復失地 (shou1 fu4 shi1 di4 = take-back-resume-lost-land = reclaims/re-occupies lost territory). Apologizing person 收回 (shou1 hui2 = takes-back = retracts) words.

收斂 (shou1 lian3 = drawn-in-contract) describes person’s modest/withdrawn style. Economic policy’s 收放 (yi1 fang4 yi1 shou1 = one-release-one-withdraw) means alternately giving economy free reign and tight control.

by Diana Yue