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

Putonghua pronunciation: feng1
Cantonese pronunciation: fung1
Meanings: abundant, lush, bountiful, plentiful

Ideogram 豐 shows top-container holding jade pieces and bottom-container 豆 (dou4, beans/container), hence 豐 means rich/abundant: 豐富 (feng1 fu4 = abundant-rich) food/experience, 豐厚 (feng1 hou4 = abundant-thick/piled-up) income/assets, 豐盛 (feng1 sheng4 = abundant-lush = rich) banquet/life/blessings.

Anticipating 豐收 (feng1 shou1 = abundant-harvest), 豐年 (feng1 nian2 = good-harvest-year), Chinese New Year pictures carry blessing “人壽年豐” (ren2 shou4 nian2 feng1 = people-longevity-year-abundant = "Wishing everyone longevity and good harvest!")

體態豐滿 (ti3 tai4 feng1 man3 = body-shape-swell-full) describes woman with luscious curves. In planning expenses, 豐儉由人 (feng1 jian4 you2 ren2 = abundant-frugal-allow-person) means big or small budget is for spender to decide. 匯豐銀行 (hui4 feng1 yin2 hang2 = credit-abundant-money-hong/bank) is HSBC’s Chinese name.

by Diana Yue