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

謝 Putonghua pronunciation: xie4
Cantonese pronunciation: je6
Meanings: wither, decline, wane, thank

謝 means thank: 謝謝! (xie4 xie0 = Thanks!) 謝幕 (xie4 mo4 = thank-curtain) = performer taking curtain calls.

謝 also means wither. Grasses/trees 枯萎 (ku1 wei3 = dry-up-wilt). Flowers 凋謝 (diao1 xie4 = wane-wither). 花開花謝 (hua1 kai1 hua1 xie4 = flowers-open/bloom-flowers-wither) laments nature/plants’ wax and wane. 老成凋謝 (lao3 cheng2 diao1 xie4 = old-mature-wane-wither) describes passing away of old people’s lives/influence.

Scientific term 代谢 (dai4 xie4 = generation-wither) = 新陳代謝 (xin1 chen2 dai4 xie4 = new-old/stale-generation-wither) = metabolism. 分解代谢 (fen1 jie3 dai4 xie4 = partition-dissociate-generation-wither = catabolism) breaks down organic matter to obtain energy. 合成代谢 (he2 cheng2 dai4 xie4 = combine-form-generation-wither = anabolism) uses energy to build cells.

by Diana Yue