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 spring weather

暖
Putonghua pronunciation: nuan3
Cantonese pronunciation: nuen5
Meanings: warm

暖 (radical 日 ri4, sun) = 溫暖 (wen1 nuan3 = warmth-warm): 暖水瓶 (nuan3 shui3 ping2 = warm/hot-water-bottle), 暖風 (nuan3 feng1 = warm-wind/breeze), 暖色 (nuan3 se1 = warm-color). 暖房 (nuan3 fang2 = 溫室 wen1 shi1 = warm-room = greenhouse) protects seedlings.

In springtime氣溫 (qi4 wen1 = 天氣溫度 tian1 qi4 wen1 du4 = sky-breath-warmth-degree = weather temperature) becomes暖和 (nuan3 he2 = warm-congenial). 春暖花開 (chun1 nuan3 hua1 kai1 = spring-warm-flowers-open) describes spring blooms.

暖心話 (nuan3 xin1 hua4 = warm-heart-words = heart-warming words) make listener feel 暖洋洋 (nuan3 yang2 yang2 = warmth-ooze-ooze = warmed, soothed). Sage laments 人情冷暖 (ren2 qing2 leng3 nuan3 = people’s-feelings-cold-warm = fickle/unpredictable shifting of sympathies).

by Diana Yue