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 fall colors

葉
Putonghua pronunciation: ye4
Cantonese pronunciation: yip6
Meaning: leaf, foliage


開枝敗葉 (kai1 zhi1 shan4 ye4 = spread-branches-disperse-leaves) means expanding family/business. 粗枝大葉 (cu1 zhi1 da4 ye4 = broad/rough-branches-big-leaves) describes crude/careless person/style.

Poet praises 紅葉 (hong2 ye4 = red-leaves/foliage), laments 落葉 (luo4 ye4 = fallen-leaves). 一葉知秋 (yi1 ye4 zhi1 qiu1 = one-leaf-know/sense-autumn) means "A fallen leaf shows autumn is here!" or "A small incident/symptom is hint of recession!"

by Diana Yue