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 salads

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

葉 has radical 艹 (= 草 cao3, grass). Poet praises 紅葉 (hong2 ye4 = red-leaves/foliage), laments 落葉 (luo4 ye4 = fallen-leaves). Married son 開枝散葉 (kai1 zhi1 shan4 ye4 = open-branches-disperse-leaves = bears descendants).

Chinese cuisine uses 綠葉 (lü4 ye4 = green-leaves) of 青菜 (qing1 cai4 = green-leafy-vegetables) e.g. 白菜 (bai2 cai4 = white-leafy-vegetable = cabbage), 菠菜 (bo1 cai4 = spinach). 荷葉飯 (he2 ye4 fan4 = lotus-leaf-rice) is fried rice wrapped in lotus leaf and steamed. 生菜包 (sheng1 cai4 bao1 = lettuce-wrap) is diced meat wrapped in raw lettuce leaf.

粗枝大葉 (cu1 zhi1 da4 ye4 = wide-branch-big-leaves) describes rough/careless/unrefined person/style. Editor shortens article by deleting 枝葉 (zhi1 ye4 = branches-leaves = secondary materials).

by Diana Yue