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 flowers

花
Putonghua pronunciation: hua1
Cantonese pronunciation: fa1
Meanings: flower, showy

花 = 花朵 (hua1 duo3 = flower-classifier) = 花兒 (hua1 er0 = flower-diminutive). In 花園 (hua1 yuan2 = flower-garden) gardeners 種花 (zhong4 hua1 = plant/cultivate-flowers), visitors 賞花 (shang3 hua1 = admire-flowers).

花 symbolizes women. 校花 (xiao4 hua1 = school-flower) = school’s top belle. 名花有主 (ming2 hua1 you3 zhu3 = famous-flower-has-master) = she already has fiance/husband. 花花公子 (hua1 hua1 gong1 zi0 = flashy-flashy-lord’s-son) = playboy.

Clever writer 稚筆生花 (miao4 bu3 sheng1 hua1 = charming-pen-sprouts-flowers). Eloquent talker 舌燦蓮花 (she3 can4 lian2 hua1 = tongue-radiant-lotus-flowers). 錦上添花 (jin3 shang4 tian1 hua1 = brocade-top-add-flowers) describes fortunate person/situation getting additional blessing/forte. 花好月圓 (hua1 hao3 yue4 yuan2 = flowers-good-moon-round) = wedding-night bliss.

by Diana Yue