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 willow trees

絮 Putonghua pronunciation: xū4
Cantonese pronunciation: suí6
Meanings: flake, tuft, flocculent, filament, flaky, bit, trivial

絮 (如 ru2, resemble + 系 = 絲 si1, thread/silk) means bits/filaments of cotton/silk fibres: 棉絮 (mian2 xū4 = cotton-tufts/flakes), 布絮 (bu4 xū4 = cloth-shreds). Hence 思絮 (si1 xū4 = idea-filaments = disconnected/drifting thoughts), 絮語 (xū4 yū3 = small-talk), 絮煩 (xū4 fan2 = trivial-and-irritating), 絮叨 (xū4 dao1 = trivial-chatter/nagging).

Society-page carries event’s 花絮 (hua1 xū4 = flowery-bits = amusing anecdotes). 絮絮不休 (xū4 xū4 bu4 xiu1 = chatter-chatter-no-rest) describes nagging wife gossipping away.

柳絮 (liu3 shu4 = willow-trees) bear 柳絮 (liu3 xū4 = willow-flakes = willow-catkins) coated with 白絨毛 (bai2 yong3 mao2 = white-fluffy-hair). Resembling 飄雪 (piao1 xue3 = blown-about-snow-flakes), 飛絮 (fei1 xū4 = flying/drifting-catkins) invading air in springtime is popular poetic theme.

by Diana Yue