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 medication effects

昏 (hun1)
Cantonese pronunciation: fan1
Meanings: dim, dusk, murky, muddled, confused, senseless, faint

昏 (日 (ri4, sun/day below 氏 yi4, horizon) means dark/blurred/senseless: 黃昏 (huang2 hun1 = yellow-dim = evening/dusk), 昏暗 (hun1 an4 = dim-dark), 昏亂 (hun1 luan4 = unclear/confused-disorderly). 昏黃 (hun1 huang2 = dusky-yellowish) describes dim lights, yellowed photographs. Combatants fight 天昏地暗 (tian1 hun1 di4 an4 = sky-darken-land-dim = violently, clouding sky).

Grandpa is 老眼昏花 (lao3 yan3 hun1 hua1 = old-eyes-dim-blurred = dim-sighted with old age). 昏君 (hun1 jün1 = brainless/immoral-ruler) likes 昏庸 (hun1 yong1 = brainless-medioocre/stupid) ministers.

昏死 (hun1 si3 = faint-die) means drop unconscious. Drugged person 昏倒 (hun1 dao3 = faints/swoons-collapses), 昏迷 (hun1 mi2 = faint-mesmerized = falls into a stupor/coma), awakes feeling 頭昏腦脹 (tou2 hun1 nao3 zhang4 = head-dense/murky-brain-bursting).

by Diana Yue