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 senile dementia

痴
Putonghua pronunciation: chi1
Cantonese pronunciation: chi5
Meaning: foolish, silly, stupid, deranged, idiot, crazy, craze, lunacy

痴 (radical 病 = illness) means 痴迷 (chi1 mi2 = crazy-infatuated): 癮瘾 (shu1 chi1 = book-crazy = bookworm), 酒瘾 (jiu3 chi1 = liquor/wine-crazy person), Romeo is 痴情 (chi1 qing2 = crazily-in-love). However, 痴肥 (chi1 fei2 = crazily-fat) means obese/obesity.

痴人說夢 (chi1 ren1 shuo1 meng4 = foolish-person-talk-dreams = talk fancy nonsense). In Chinese, dementia is 痴呆症 (chi1 dai1 zheng4 = foolish-deranged-illness), 失智症 (shi1 zhi4 zheng4 = lose-intelligence-illness).

老人痴呆症 (lao3 ren2 chi1 dai1 zheng4 = old-people-foolish-deranged-illness = senile dementia) patients feel 憂鬱 (you1 yu4 = worried-melancholic/depressed), 失憶 (shi1 yi1 = lose-their-memory = forgetful), get 妄想 (wang4 xiang3 = fantastic/unrealistic-thoughts = delusions).

by Diana Yue