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

Putonghua pronunciation: dai1
Cantonese pronunciation: daai1
Meaning: stagnant, inactive, stupid, dumb, slow, rigid, idiotic, deranged

呆 (dai1, mouth) = dumb/slow. 呆子 (dai1 zi0 = dumb-guy = fool/idiot) 呆頭呆腦 (dai1 tou2 dai1 nao3 = stupid-head-stupid-brain = looks real dumb). 喬呆子 (shui dai1 zi0 = book-dumb-guy = bookworms) 呆板 (dai1 ban3 = are un-smart-rigid). Verb 呆 means inactive: 呆在家 (dai1 zai4 jia1 = stay/idle-around-at-home).

老人痴呆症 (lao3 ren2 chi1 dai1 zhi1 = old-people-deranged-dumb-illness = senile dementia) patients 目光呆滯 (mu4 guang1 dai1 zhi4 = eyes-light-dumb-slow = look dully at people/things), 言話呆笨 (shuo1 hua4 dai1 ben4 = talk-speak-unintelligently-clumsily).

Boss shouts: “Don’t be 呆若木雞 (dai1 ruo4 mu4 ji1 = dumb-resemble-wooden-cock/hen): Don’t just stand there like a dummy!” Employee 嚇呆了 (xia1 dai1 le0 = is-scared-stiff!)

by Diana Yue