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: luan4
Cantonese pronunciation: luen6
Meaning: confuse, chaotic, arbitrarily, confusion, disorder, violate, riot

亂 (pictogram suggesting hands arranging disheveled silk) = 混亂 (hun4 luan4 = chaos-confusion), 忙亂 (mang2 luan4 = busy-chaotic), 動亂 (dong4 luan4 = move-revolt = riot/turmoil). In 亂世 (luan4 shi4 = riotous-times), warlords 亂殺 (luan4 sha1 = madly-kill), creating 亂葬崗 (luan4 zang4 gang3 = arbitrary-bury-mound = unmarked burial mounds).

Drinking 亂性 (luan4 xing4 = confuses-the-mind/senses). 亂倫 (luan4 lun2 = violate-ethical-order) = incest. 亂七八糟 (luan4 qi1 ba1 zao1 = confused-seven-eight-terrible) describes mess/confusion.

Dementia patient 頭腦昏亂 (tou2 nao3 hun1 luan4 = head-brain-dim-confused = is deranged), 亂說 (luan4 shuo1 = disorderly-talk = talks nonsense), 亂跑 (luan4 pao3 = disorderly-run = runs loose), anytime may 出亂子 (chu1 luan4 zi0 = come-out-disorder-thing/diminutive = have a mishap).

by Diana Yue