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

漏
Putonghua pronunciation: lou4
Cantonese pronunciation: lau6
Meaning: seep, drip, leak, spillage, omit, miss, skip


銅壺滴漏 (tong2 hu2 di1 lou4 = brass/copper-pot-drip-leak) = clypsydra, ancient Persian/Chinese water-clock. 漏洞 (lou4 dong4 = leaking-hole) also means loophole. Bad argument 錯漏 百出 (cuo4 lou4 bai3 chu1 = wrong-omit-hundred-out = is full of shaky/wrong points and loopholes/omissions).

漏網之魚 (lou4 wang3 zhi1 yu2 = leak-net-'s-fish) means escaped fish or person who avoided mass arrest. Dementia patient 漏帶 (lou4 dai4 = forgets-to-bring) ID-card, 遺漏 (yi2 lou4 = lose-omit = forgets/loses) umbrella/keys.

by Diana Yue