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: diu1
Cantonese pronunciation: diu1
Meaning: lose, drop, throw, leave, mislay, misplace

丟 = 丢失 (diu1 shi1 = drop-lose = lose/abandon/misplace).
Careless people 丟丢 (nong4 diu1 = make-lose = lose/mislay) keys/pens. Unfaithful husband 丢下 (diu1 xia4 = leaves-drops/abandons) wife. Lazy pianist’s skills 丢荒 (diu1 huang1 = leave-unintended/wasted = go rusty).

Out-of-favor employee 丢職 (diu1 zhi2 = loses-post), 丢面子 (diu1 mian4 zio = lose-face-diminutive =丢臉 diu1 lian3 = loses-face). Friend advises: 丢掉幻想 (diu1 diao4 huan4 xiang3 = throw-away-delusion-thoughts = Drop fantasies!) 丢開煩惱 (diu1 kai1 fan2 nao3 = Throw/put-aside-worries-miseries!)

Dementia patient 丢了錢 (diu1 le0 qian2 = lost-money), 丢了證件 (diu1 le0 zheng4 jian4 = lost-evidence-item = lost IDs), luckily didn’t 丢了命 (diu1 le0 ming4 = lose-life = get killed).

by Diana Yue