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: tui4
Cantonese pronunciation: tui1
Meaning: take off, put inside, strip, shed, remove, discard, cast off, molt, fade


Model demonstrates trendy top-coat: 褥下 (tui4 xia4 = take-off) sleeves, makes hands 褕進 (tui4 jin4 = pull-back-into) sleeves. User of skin-whitening cream wants to 褥黑斑 (tui4 hei1 ban1 = remove-dark-spots).

Time/washing makes prints/fabrics 褥色 (tui4 se1 = lose-color), wallpaper 褕落 (tui4 luo4 = shed-off = peel). Dementia patient fears memories would 褥色 (tui4 se1 = fade-color = fade).

by Diana Yue