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

白
Putonghua pronunciation: bai2
Cantonese pronunciation: baak6
Meaning: white, blank

Ideogram 白 (slant over 日 ri4, sun) means since sunrise, white/clear: 白色 (bai2 se1 = white-colour), 白天 (bai2 tian1 = white-sky = daytime), 白雲 (bai2 yun2 = white-clouds), 清白 (qing1 bai2 = clean-white/innocent/faultless). US’s 白宮 (bai2 gong1 = white-palace) = the White House.

Western 白酒 (bai2 jiu3 = white-wine) is not Chinese 白酒 (bai2 jiu3 = baijiu), clear, strong distilled spirits e.g. 茅台 (mao1 tai1 = Maotai). 白紙黑字 (bai2 zhi3 he1 zhi4 = white-paper-black-words) means clearly written, unmistakable/undeniable.

一張白紙 (yi1 zhang1 bai2 zhi3 = one-sheet-white-paper) describes innocent child susceptible to good/bad influences. 白髯 (bai2 fa4 = white-haired) dementia patient’s mind 一片空白 (yi1 pian4 kong1 bai2 = one-piece-empty-white = is a complete blank).

by Diana Yue