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

無 (none) + adjective/noun/verb means opposite: 無形 (wu2 xing2 = without-form), 無限 (wu2 xian4 = un-limited). Regions互通有無 (hu4 tong1 you3 wu2 = mutually-transmit-have-have-nots = exchange resources). 無名氏 (wu2 ming2 shi4 = no-name-person) = anonymous.

Pessimist feels 無奈 (wu2 nai4 = no-how/what-handle/tackle = helpless), 虚無 (xü1 wu2 = empty-none = nihilistic): 歲月無情 (sui4 yue4 wu2 qing2 = years-months-no-feelings = Time is cruel), 世事無常 (shì shì shì shì shì wu2 chang2 = world's-things-no-normal/always = Nothing is constant), 苦海無邊 (ku3 hai3 shì wu2 bian1 = sorrows-sea-no-rim/edge = Sorrows never end).

Dementia patient 無法 (wu2 fa3 = no-method = cannot) remember things, feels 無所謂 (wu2 suo3 wei4 = no-to-say/call = doesn’t matter).

Putonghua pronunciation: wu2
Cantonese pronunciation: mo4
Meaning: none, without, lacking, nihility

by Diana Yue