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 Alzheimer's disease

妄 (wǎng)
Putonghua pronunciation: wang4
Cantonese pronunciation: mong5
Meaning: unreasonable, confused, conceited, preposterous, rash, absurd, deluded

妄 (radical 女 nü3, woman) describes 虚妄 (xū1 wang4 = empty/conceited) words/ideas, 狂妄 (kuang2 wang4 = mad-conceited = brassy/arrogant) behavior. Sage warns against 妄言 (wang4 yan2 = conceited-speech), 妄念 (wang4 nian4 = wild/improper-thoughts), 輕舉妄動 (qing1 jü3 wang4 dong4 = hasty-gestures=rash-move = indiscreet/rash actions).


阿尔海默氏病 (a4 zì1 hai3 mo4 shí shì bīng4 = “Alzheimer”’s-transliterated-disease = Alzheimer’s disease) patients may develop 妄想 (wang4 xiang3 = unreal-thoughts = delusions), 諱妄 (zhan1 wang4 = talk-non-stop-deluded = acute confusional state = deliriums).

by Diana Yue