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

失
Putonghua pronunciation: shi1
Cantonese pronunciation: sat1
Meaning: lose, loss, lost

失 (radical 大 da4, big) means 失去 (shi1 qù = lost-gone): 失明 (shi1 ming2 = lose-light/eyesight = blind), 失聰 (shi1 cong1 = lose-hearing = deaf), 失業 (shi1 ye4 = lose-job).

Unfortunate woman 失貞 (shi1 zhen1 = lose-virginity), 失婚 (shi1 hun1 = lose-marriage = is divorced/abandoned). Career 失敗 (shi1 bai4 = lose-defeated = failure) incurs financial 損失 (sun3 shi1 = damages-losses).

失智 (shi1 zhi4 = lose-intelligence = dementia) patient shows signs of 思覺失調 (sil jüe2 shi1 tiao2 = thoughts-senses-lose-balance = early psychosis), behaves 失常 (shi1 chang2 = lose-usual = oddly/abnormally), may 失禁 (shi1 jin4 = lose-constraint = cannot control bowels/bladder discharge), 失憶 (shi1 yi1 = lose-memory), 失蹤 (shi1 zong1 = lose-tracks = get lost).

by Diana Yue