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

智
Putonghua pronunciation: zhi4
Cantonese pronunciation: ji3
Meaning: senses, mind, sanity, intelligence, knowledge, wisdom

智 (zhi, comprehend + 日 ri4, day/daily) = 理智 (li3 zhi4 = reasoning-intelligence = sanity), 智力 (zhi4 li4 = intellectual-ability/power), 智慧 (zhi4 hui4 = intelligence-wisdom). 智者 (zhi4 zhe3 = wise-person/sage) 大智若愚 (da4 zhi4 ruo4 yu2 = great-wisdom-resembles-stupid = is wise but appears foolish/modest).

智庫 (zhi4 ku4 = think-tank) recruits 智囊 (zhi4 nang2 = wisdom-sack = backroom boys), 智多星 (zhi4 duo1 xing1 = wisdom-much-star = people with smart brains). 智能手機 (zhi4 neng2 shou3 ji1 = intelligent-ability-hand-machine) = smartphone,

失智 (sh1 zhi4 = lose-intelligence = demented) person 心智失常 (xin1 zhi4 sh1 chang2 = mind-senses-lose-normal = loses mind), 逐渐 神智不清 (shen2 zhi4 bu4 qing1 = spirit-senses-not-clear = becomes insane).

by Diana Yue