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 old people

Putonghua pronunciation: lao3
Cantonese pronunciation: lo5
Meanings: old, elderly, time-worn, long-lasting, dated, senior

老 (showing disheveled oldster with walking-stick) means 老舊 (lao3 jiu4 = old-used/dated/passé), 老去 (lao3 qü4 = aging-aged/faded). 老掉牙 (lao3 diao4 ya2 = old-drop-teeth) describes stale/unoriginal story/idea.

老友 (lao3 you3 = old-friend/pal) is endearing term. 老師 (lao3 shi1 = old-teacher), 老板 (lao3 ban3 = old-board) just mean teacher, boss. 老毛 (lao3 Mao2 = old-Mao) = Mao Zedong. 倚老賣老 (yi2 lao3 mai4 lao3 = depend-old-sell-old) describes oldies flaunting age/seniority.

老人 (lao3 ren2 = old-people’s bodies/brains 老化 (lao3 hua4 = age-deteriorate). 老頭 (lao3 tou2 = old-head = old man) grieves as 老伴 (lao3 ban4 = old/long-time-companion/spouse) gets 老人失智症 (lao3 ren2 shi1 zhi4 zheng4 = old-person-lose-memory/sanity-illness = senile dementia = Alzheimer’s disease).

by Diana Yue