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 choirs

**聲**

Cantonese pronunciation: *sing1*

Meanings: sound, voice

聲 (radical 耳 *er3*, ear) means 聲音 (sheng1 yin1 = voices-sounds/noises): 水聲 (shui3 sheng1 = water’s-sound), 鳥聲 (niao3 sheng1 = bird-song), 迴聲 (hui2 sheng1 = return/sound = echoes), 人聲 (ren2 sheng1 = people’s-sounds/voices): 哭聲 (ku1 sheng1 = sobbing/wailing-sounds), 笑聲 (xiao4 sheng1 = laughing/giggling-sounds), 書聲 (shui1 sheng1 = book/reading/reciting-sounds), 歌聲 (ge1 sheng1 = singing-sound).

風聲 (feng1 sheng1 = wind’s-sounds = suspicious signs/whisperings/stirrings) alert spies/speculators. Putonghua pronounces Chinese characters/zi in 四聲 (si4 sheng1 = four-tones), i.e. four 聲調 (sheng1 diao4 = sound-pitch).

In 聲樂 (sheng1 yue4 = vocal-music), opera singers use 美聲唱法 (mei3 sheng1 chang4 fa3 = beautiful-sound-singing-method = bel canto). 先聲奪人 (xian1 sheng1 duo2 ren2 = early-sound-capture-people) describes singer/star/athlete’s stunning debut.

by Diana Yue