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:

1\textsuperscript{st} tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2\textsuperscript{nd} tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3\textsuperscript{rd} tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4\textsuperscript{th} 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

部
Putonghua pronunciation: bu4
Cantonese pronunciation: bo6
Meanings: part, section

部 = 部份 (bu4 fen4 = part-portion): 大部份 (da4 bu4 fen4 = big-part-portion = most/majority), 小部份 (xiao3 bu4 fen4 = small-part-portion = fewer/minority). Government has 部門 (bu4 men2 = part-door = ministries/bureaus), e.g. 外交部 (wai4 jiao1 bu4 = external-friendship-ministry = Ministry of Foreign Affairs). General commands 部隊 (bu4 dui4 = part-team = army), 部下 (bu4 xia4 = section-under = subordinates).

Patient’s operated 部位 (bu4 wei4 = part-position = location/area) receives 局部麻醉 (jü2 bu4 ma2 zui4 = confined-part-numb-drunk = local/partial anesthesia). 下部 (xia4 bu4 = under-part) means man/woman’s lower private parts.

Choral singing involves 四聲部 (si4 sheng1 bu4 = four-voice/vocal-parts: sopranos, altos, tenors, basses) 合唱 (he2 chang4 = unite-sing = singing together).

by Diana Yue