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

Putonghua pronunciation: xie2
Cantonese pronunciation: haai4
Meanings: harmony, accord, complete, meaningful, funny

諧 (言 = yan2, speak + 皆 = jie1, together) = speaking in unison.
和谐 (he2 xie2 = merge/calm/peace-accord) describes peaceful/meaningful relationship. 事諧 (shi4 xie2 = action-harmonized) means action completed. 琴瑟和谐 (qin2 se1 he2 xie2 = lute-zither-peaceful-harmonious) describes loving/steady marriage. 房事不諧 (fang2 shi4 bu4 xie2 = room-affairs-not-harmonious) means couple’s sex life is unsatisfactory.

Clown delivers 諧諧 (hui1 xie2 = funny-meaningful = funny) lines. 亦莊亦諧 (yi4 zhuang1 yi4 xie2 = also-serious-also-humorous) describes speech that is both serious and humorous.

Composer 諧調 (xie2 tiao2 = harmonizes-adjusts) musical chords. Conductor explains musical composition’s 和聲 (he2 sheng1 = harmonious-sound = harmonic structure), but singers 音律不諧 (yin1 lu4 bu4 xie2 = sound-rules-no-harmonious = produce discord).

by Diana Yue