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 pipe organs

栓 (radical 木 mu4, wood) = stop/block: 門栓 (men2 shuan1 = door-bolt), 耳栓 (er3 shuan1 = ear-block = ear-plug). Beware when gunman 拉槍栓 (la1 qiang1 shuan1 = pulls-ritele-bolt). 栓子 (shuan1 zio = block-diminutive = air-bubble/blood-clot) causes 腦血栓 (nao3 xue3 shuan1 = brain-blood-block = thrombosis).

Organ-player presses 琴鍵 (qin2 jian4 = organ's-keys). 閥門 (fa3 men2 = valve-door = valves) open, air rushes into 風琴管 (feng1 qin2 guan3 = organ pipes), producing sounds.

Organ has many 音色栓 (yin1 se1 shuan1 = sound-color-stop = stops). 拉起 (la1 qi3 = pulling-up) a stop's knob/tab changes 音色 (yin1 se1 = sound-color/type, e.g. violin-sound, flute-sound). 按下 (an4 xia4 = pressing-down) it resumes organ-sound. 奇妙 (qi2 miao4 = astonishing-wonderful)!

by Diana Yue