

We've all got an accent, however much we say we haven't...

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■ Stephen Fry's pronunciation makes him hard to place.

A number of people have written letters to the EDP in which they claim, or mention in passing, that they "don't have an accent".

They're not alone: there are many people in the world who think only other people have accents.

"You have an accent!" people in America exclaim when they meet an English person.

They don't mean anything bad by it – they're just being friendly and are intrigued by the way you speak, but they clearly don't think they have an accent themselves. Which of course they do – an American accent, as everyone here will agree.

I haven't met any of the letter-writers "without an accent", but I'm happy to say that I'm quite sure that, like the Americans, they are not correct in what they say. The fact is that everybody has an accent, including you and me and Her Majesty the Queen. There are no exceptions.

The term accent refers to pronunciation, and you can't speak without pronouncing.

Your accent is simply the way you pronounce the vowels and consonants of your language, and the intonation

patterns you use.

Accents are mostly acquired in early childhood, and in this country they are simultaneously both social and regional. The higher up the social scale your origin, the fewer regional clues your accent normally contains. Some people sound like they come from Norwich, some like they come from somewhere in East Anglia, some just like they come from somewhere in the English south-east.

And you can't tell from his accent where Stephen Fry comes from at all, except somewhere in England – but you can tell a lot about his social background. Sometimes when people say "I don't have an accent", they mean they speak with

this regionless upper-class accent – but they are wrong because it is still an accent.

Other people may mean they have a mixed accent, because they moved a lot in their childhood and so "come from" several different places: their accents are not regional in any straightforward sense, though a linguist will often be able to point to the different regional sources of the mixture.

But these people do still have an accent like the rest of us do, even if it may be unique to themselves.

The accents which we all have are part of ourselves and our identity; and we have no reason to be anything but happy about them, whatever our background.