

San Fairy Ann

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

The phrase 'San Fairy Ann' might sound familiar, perhaps conjuring up memories of Paul McCartney's 1976 [song](#), or Barbara Windsor's 1965 [comedy](#) of the same name. But what does it actually mean, and where does it come from?

The saying has cropped up in our [WordBank](#) collection twice so far, both times the speakers attributing it to an elderly grandparent.

[C1442 San Fairy Ann \(female b.1942\) uncatalogued](#)

'My grandmother always used the phrase when she didn't want to know about something was 'San Fairy Ann' which when I started to learn French at school I discovered was 'ça ne fait rien'. I believe that this was um she probably picked it up from my grandfather when he came back from the First World War.'

[C1442X3968 San Fairy Ann \(female b.1962\)](#)

'In my family we use the phrase 'San Fairy Ann,' which is yelled at people – usually the kids – when they're misbehaving. Um, we think it might come from the French, ça ne fait rien, which we think means – is a phrase of dismissal. My grandmother who's ninety-eight uses it and we've all picked it up from her.'

As the speakers themselves observe here, 'San Fairy Ann' is the result of a common process whereby a saying or word is converted by mis-hearers into something different that seems to make (at least some) sense. There's 'all intensive purposes,' for example, 'electrical votes,' and of course 'damp squid.' Geoffrey Pullum and Mark Liberman call these ['eggcorn'](#) moments, after the mis-interpretation of 'acorn' – and explain that they are not stupid mistakes, but rather 'imaginative attempts at relating something heard to lexical material already known.'

In the case of 'San Fairy Ann', the process has taken place in translation; the phrase is recorded as becoming popular in England after British soldiers came into contact with French during the First World War. 'Ça ne fait rien' – meaning 'never mind' or 'it doesn't matter' – became 'San Fairy Ann,' also commonly 'san ferry Ann' or 'Sally Fairy Ann.' A dictionary of 'Soldier and Sailor Words' from 1925 even has an entry for 'sand for Mary-Ann.' This type of 'soldier slang' is also behind French-influenced phrases like 'mercy buckets' (*merci beaucoup*) and 'bottle of plonk' (*vin blanc*).

Author Jeanette Winterson has also written about the concept, celebrating it as ['a tribute to the exuberance and flexibility of language.'](#) Below she describes the evolution of 'San Fairy Ann' in her own family:

My father was in Ipres, (pronounced Wipers), during the War, and like many of his generation, came back with bits of French. Ce ne fait rien turned into

San Fairy Ann, meaning Stuff You, and then a new character emerged in Lancashire-speak, known as Fairy Ann; a got-up creature, no better than she should be, who couldn't give a damn. 'San Fairy Ann to you', morphed into, 'Who does she think she is? Fairy Ann?'

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