

Q. Why is a mouse when it spins?

A. *Because the higher the fewer.*

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This particular interchange should be familiar to anyone who has been brought up or has lived in London, although not necessarily to those who live in other parts of the English-speaking world, and is of course a *non sequitur*, so any attempt to extract any meaning from it is doomed to failure. It seems to have first been recorded in about 1900 and was certainly a common schoolboy interchange in the late 1940s. It appears in a letter written by John Dos Passos in 1919, and as he was at school in England in 1906-7 he could well have picked it up there.

The whole point is that there is no meaning. Around the world there are many phrases like this; 'Do they have ponies down a pit?' 'What's the difference between a chicken?' 'What was the name of the engine driver?' 'How old is Anne?' 'How high is up?', etc. These are not the kind of questions to which a factual answer is expected as much as examples of a particular kind of rhetoric in which the literal meaning of the words has no direct connection to the subject matter, rather there is an implied meaning of 'What a dumb question!'.

A rather better-known parallel would be the cliché 'How long is a piece of string?', a question often given in answer to show just how meaningless a question that has just been put to the speaker is. If you ask me, for example, 'how long will I take to learn English?' I might just reply with 'how long is a piece of string?', in the sense that there is no term of reference that can adequately quantify the concept 'learn English'). So, if someone asks you a quite ridiculous or unanswerable question, e. g. 'do you think it will rain on your birthday next year?', standard rhetorical retorts such as 'how old is Anne?' or 'how high is a Chinaman?', comment on the meaninglessness of the question and at the same time imply the idiocy of anyone dumb enough to ask such questions.

The deliberate illogicality of 'why is a mouse ...' is repeated in 'hat's the difference between a chicken?' The "answer to this one is of course that 'one of its legs is both the same'. And 'what was the name of the engine-driver?' comes from the old joke about giving lots of detailed information about a train's speed, destination, times, etc, and then asking the poor listener a question completely unconnected with the details he has been concentrating on. This expression can be used either to express disinterest in something someone has been saying, or, somewhat more aggressively, to start an argument. The same goes for 'do they have ponies down a pit?' and 'why is a mouse when it spins?', both of which can signal the start of an altercation, possibly a violent quarrel, although are not necessarily always used for this purpose.

Because they have become catch phrases, the answers 'because the higher the fewer' and 'one of its legs is both the same' are stock replies to the "first half" of their pairs. This tendency to finish off a phrase started by someone else is typical of the catch phrase, and a particular feature of much inter-city slang, both of these being cockney in origin. In this case of course the fact that they don't make sense is precisely the point.

So the joke is very much an in-joke, an example of that kind of hermetic humour that is often impenetrable to outsiders, be they South American teachers, translators or Mancunian bank managers.