



Common Improprieties in Bridge —Other than Hesitations

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We know that bridge is a game of finely tuned communication, during both the auction and the play. We also know that one of the primary avenues of illegal communication is hesitations, whether deliberate or inadvertent. They convey subtle, but often unmistakable information, information that the partner may not legally act upon.

While hesitations are probably the single most frequent means of illicit communication—and the topic of a prior paper—they are not the only means. Among the other possibilities are inappropriate questions (including those meant solely for partner's benefit), poorly phrased (a lawyer would say leading) questions, asking for a trick review when it's too late, body language, and “coffee housing.”

Inappropriate Questions

Oftimes in the depths of a murky auction, we belatedly realize that we have missed an important clue. Before appreciating the consequences, we blurt out a question which betrays some feature of our own hand. In such cases, the Director should be called, because information has been passed improperly, information which is directly relevant to partner's choice of action. And now, regardless of partner's choice, the opponents may reasonably charge that he was influenced and request an adjustment when their result is less than optimal.

So instead of questioning a particular bid, if possible, ask about bids surrounding it as well. If questions that might influence partner remain, it is perfectly proper to ask him/her to leave the table while you pursue the matter with the opponents.

Another point which is often overlooked: you are not your partner's keeper. Once the auction is underway, it is not proper for you to call to partner's attention some feature of the opponents' conventions which you fear he has overlooked. Where he is not protected by the Alert procedure, he must protect himself. The opponents help in this regard by having the required two identically-filled-out convention cards readily available.

(By the way, if you think partner was daydreaming or distracted and missed an Alert given with adequate volume and/or visual panache, it's improper to ask, “Did you hear the Alert, partner?” On the other hand, if the volume was very low or partner is hearing impaired, you could quietly say to the Alerter something like, “I think that was too low for my partner to hear.”)



1. During the Auction

A Question of Penalty

A blatant example of acting as partner's keeper and attempting to direct the auction at the same time happened recently as follows:

An opening weak NT was overcalled with 2♦ (natural); and the notrumper's partner competed with 2♠, which was doubled and passed to the 2♦ bidder. As this person was studying his hand, his partner (the doubler) asked his Left Hand Opponent (LHO) pointedly: "Do you play weak NT in all positions?" It is actions like these which earn one a place in the ACBL's files, and prompted the League to require two identically-filled-out convention cards.

In this case, the 2♦ bidder was so embarrassed, he immediately called 3♦ (down one), though he might legitimately have passed the double if his partner hadn't tried to prompt him.

2. During the Play

Was That Stayman?

To question the meaning of a particular bid when partner is on lead is clearly lead directional. This is the primary reason that the League has adopted face-down opening leads—so the leader's partner can ask questions without affecting the leader's choice. However, the problem does not end there. Consider the following example:

After partner, North, opens a strong 1NT, you go through Stayman and then raise yourself to game when partner supports your spades. Left Hand Opponent makes his opening lead (7♥) face down, and Right Hand Opponent (RHO) inquires, "Was that 2♣ Stayman?" Don't laugh, it really happened. This was the layout:

	♠ K T 5						
	♥ A K 2		N	E	S	W	
	♦ Q 9 5 4		1NT	P	2♣	P	
	♣ A T 3		2♦	P	2♠	P	
			3♠	P	4♠	P	
			P	P	P		
♠ Q 6 3		♠ J 4					
♥ 7 6		♥ J T 9 8					
♦ A 7 6 3		♦ K 8 2					
♣ 8 6 5 4		♣ K Q J 9					
	♠ A 9 8 7 2						
	♥ Q 5 4 3						
	♦ J T						
	♣ 7 2						

Beneath dummy's ace, RHO is forced to play a heart that looks high and therefore encouraging (using standard attitude). (Note, a false card of the 5♥ promotes that misconception, albeit ever so slightly.) Then, when you duck a diamond into LHO at trick two, he somehow finds the killing club switch. The Director, necessarily, will not allow the lead if he is called.



A point on face-down leads ... once a face-down lead is placed on the table, it is a played card, and like any other played card, it cannot be retracted.

A face-down lead is a played card

Poorly Phrased Questions

Poorly phrased questions arise most often with jump bids. Out of habit, players often ask: “Was that a weak bid?” Sometimes the phrasing truly is out of habit, but sometimes the questioner only asks when he has a good holding in the suit and is a little surprised by the bid. If that’s the case, partner may pick up on the clue. And the clue, by the way, may simply be a “tell” that the questioner is unaware of. Additionally, under those circumstances, the questioner’s tone of voice may give away his feelings about the suit.

So, it’s much better to ask questions with neutral phrasing, such as: “What is your agreement on that bid?” Or in response to an Alert, just say, “Would you explain, please,” and let the Alerter explain without putting words in his/her mouth. If the initial explanation is inadequate, ask questions at that point, not before. (Note. The neutral phrasing seems to also help in keeping a neutral tone.)

Trick Reviews Affecting the Defense

It is a common failing among bridge players to ask for a review of the previous trick while waiting for partner to lead to the next. They don’t realize (one hopes) until the deed is done that they are calling partner’s attention to their own played card. Frequently they are expecting a ruff or a switch to the suit in which they have just made a high discard (playing standard discards). The trick review in such cases acts as an illegal message to partner that their play was indeed a signal, and not simply an action forced by the circumstances of the deal.

For just this reason, the ACBL eliminated the privilege of unrestricted trick review. Instead, a player is allowed to study the cards on a given trick only so long as his own card remains exposed. Once he has turned his card, that trick is forever beyond his recall. If a player who has turned his card asks to see another card that has also been turned over, it is perfectly correct to point out that he forfeited that right when he turned his card.

Body Language: Grimaces, Nodding, Emphatic Bids or Plays

Within an established partnership it is difficult to ignore the nuances of expression which tell us partner’s state of mind: whether he is pleased or anxious, confused or confident. The ethical player, like a responsible juror, tries to base his judgment solely on the legal evidence. Unfortunately, many players seem addicted to practices which let partner (and the whole table) know in no uncertain terms that they are displeased by partner’s actions, or that they expect partner to make a particular bid or play.



One recent real-life example occurred during this bidding sequence:

N	E	S	W	
1♣	P	1♥	P	} When South saw North pulling the green pass card from the box, he gasped noticeably, whereupon North got the message that South thought 3♥ was forcing and bid 3NT.
1NT	P	3♥	P	
3NT				

This holdover from social bridge destroys any hope for a fair contest and places the opponents in an awkward position, for the perpetrator of these misdeeds is usually oblivious to the fact that he has done anything wrong. What is more, calling the Director frequently only aggravates the wrong-doer, who feels he is being unfairly accused of cheating.

One can only wish there were some way to bring home to the people who indulge in such displays that they are ruining the game, albeit unintentionally, for the rest of us. Perhaps a unit or district committee should take them aside and explain. Then, if they don't improve, the Director(s) should assess procedural penalties.

Coffee Housing: Comments to Mislead, Distract or Direct

We've all encountered overly talkative opponents at the table. For most, their exuberance is a natural *joie de vivre*. But for some, there's a distinct "coffee housing" element. Coffee housing is making gratuitous statements with the intention of misleading or distracting the opponents, or alternatively, directing partner. A real-life example occurred as follows:

After playing spade contracts on the first two boards of a round, N-S landed in 4♥, never mentioning spades (♠s), where they also had a substantial fit. Before the opening lead was selected, leader's partner playfully announced to the table:

"So, we're finally out of Spades."

In spite of an attractive sequence in ♦, a low spade from 4 small hit the table, followed by a cover in dummy and a ruff from third hand.

The inexperienced N-S pair suffered this affront in silence, but clearly, the Director should have been called the minute the low ♠ hit the table.

Conclusion

We hope to eliminate or at least significantly reduce occurrences of these improprieties through education. When they do occur, however, immediately calling the Director (nicely) is the proper line of defense.

