



Hesitations in Bridge

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Bridge is a game of finely tuned communication, during both the auction and the play. While mannerisms, tone of voice, facial expressions and hesitations are an integral, legitimate part of poker, they have no place at the bridge table. The proprieties and ethics of bridge declare that knowledge so gained by one partner from another is unauthorized information and the recipient may not legally act upon that information.

One of the primary avenues of illegal communication is hesitations, whether deliberate or inadvertent. Hesitations convey subtle, but often unmistakable information. Should a hesitation possibly conveying unauthorized information occur, call the Director so he/she may assure that the hesitating side does not benefit therefrom, and that the opposing side does not suffer as a result. Further, if the act appears to be a deliberate attempt to communicate or mislead, the Director shares this potentially unethical conduct with all the Unit's Directors. Offenses so noted may be periodically reviewed, and if the accumulated weight of evidence convinces the reviewers that the offender is guilty of repeated unethical conduct, he/she may be barred from future events.

In the following sections, hesitations are illustrated with cases drawn from actual play, in order that players will more readily recognize them when they occur and be better prepared to help the Director repair the resulting damage.

Informative Hesitations

A hesitation, of itself, seldom constitutes an impropriety. Every player, including the most expert, occasionally faces difficult decisions which require some time to resolve. It is never improper to hesitate over a legitimate problem. However, a hesitation during the auction or on defense passes information to the hesitator's partner, information which it is improper for him to use, since it was not conveyed by the actual bid or play finally selected. Therefore, whenever such an informative hesitation occurs, the players should call the Director to monitor further developments.

Two suggestions may greatly decrease the possible embarrassment for all concerned. First, when an opponent hesitates and you feel the Director must be called, you should assure your opponents that nothing wrong has happened, and that they are not being accused of unethical conduct. Second, if partner has hesitated and you know you are going to take an action which the opponents may not consider justified, or which appears unusual, you should call the Director if the opponents have not. By not calling the Director, your opponents have expressed trust that you will behave ethically, ignoring the information passed by your partner's hesitation. If you take an action which appears to betray that trust, then by not calling the Director yourself, you place the opponents in the position of accusing you of unethical conduct if they do subsequently call, or of suffering their imagined damage in silence if they do not call.

1. During the Auction

The Maximum Pass

A hesitation after partner has raised clearly shows an impulse to bid again. Thus, in a competitive auction, such as:

N	E	S	W	
1S	2H	2S	3H	}
P	P	?		

If the 1♠ opener has hesitated before passing, responder may not use that information in deciding whether to bid or pass. The rule as presently enforced, is that responder must choose an action which the vast majority of good players would select most of the time, in the absence of any hesitation.

In the present example, responder might hold ♠ Q J 2 ♥ 10 9 4 ♦ A 10 8 6 ♣ 9 6 3, a flat seven points, which most good players would pass. It does not matter that the person holding this hand is an inveterate gambler, who almost always bids one more; after his partner has hesitated, it is no longer a gamble. Partner's hand may well be ♠ K 10 7 5 4 ♥ A 2 ♦ K Q 9 3 ♣ 10 2, with 3♠ virtually cold and 3♥ a good bet to make, whereas it will surely not be ♠ A 7 5 4 3 ♥ Q 2 ♦ K 7 3 ♣ A 8 2, which will not even make 2♠, but will often set 3♥.

Beginner's Blackwood

This one has happened to all of us. We sit quietly and listen to the auction:

N	E	S	W	
1H	P	3H	P	}
4NT	P	5C	P	
5H	P	6H!		

during which the 1♥ opener huddled for quite a while before bidding a reluctant 5♥. Clearly, they are only off one ace, and responder should have a fine hand for slam. Equally clear, responder may not ethically act on his partner's hesitation, and if the Director is called now, he will adjust the contract to 5♥. However, if the Director is not called until the contract has been played and made, he will no longer adjust the score, for the defenders have just taken a two-way shot at getting a good result: if the slam had failed, they would probably not have called the Director.

2. During the Play

The Reluctant Deuce

After an auction of 1NT-P-3NT, the opening lead is the ♣ 9 in the following layout:

	♠ J 5 3	
	♥ K Q 2	
	♦ J 9 6 2	
	♣ K Q 5	
♠ A 6 2		♠ T 9 8 7
♥ 8 7 5 3		♥ T 9 4
♦ A 8		♦ 7 4 3
♣ 9 8 7 6		♣ A J 2
	♠ K Q 4	
	♥ A J 6	
	♦ K Q T 5	
	♣ T 4 3	

Declarer naturally puts up the ♣ K or Q, and the second defender stews before finally parting with the deuce. Clearly, he hopes his partner will continue the suit when he regains the lead; it is the only defense to set the contract. His hesitation, however, has passed this information illegally to his partner, who now in good conscience cannot play his partner for good clubs, because the card played (the deuce) of itself discourages further club leads. (If playing upside-down attitude, the deuce would be encouraging and thus, a totally different situation.) Unfortunately, most players are not aware of this obligation, so the wisest course when such a defensive hesitation has occurred is to call the Director to monitor further developments.

Deceptive Hesitations

A different breed of cat altogether is the hesitation to deceive: when it is not an accidental or absent-minded slip, it is done with larceny in the heart. Either the person committing this impropriety has never been told that such fakery is against the rules, or he does not believe he can be caught and punished. It is very hard for people to realize that this is one of the essential differences between bridge and poker, that no use of tone or manner to influence the game is legitimate. For it is a short step from the single-handed bluff to tacit cooperation with partner (“You knew I was fooling, didn’t you?”), to outright cheating.

1. During the Auction

Faux Maximum Pass

N	E	S	W	
1S	2H	2S	3H	}
P	P	?		

In the maximum pass situation discussed in *Informative Hesitations*, if opener (North), holding a mediocre hand, deliberately and noticeably pauses before passing to practically bar partner from bidding, that action is unethical.

Another faux maximum pass possibility occurs in the following auction:

N	E	S	W	
1H	1S	2H	P	}
P	?			

If North deliberated long and hard before passing, East would be reluctant to reopen the bidding lest he push the opponents to a makeable game they already declined to bid. But again, if opener has a mediocre hand, the pause can only be an attempt to deter East from bidding. Since this kind of bluff is outlawed in bridge, it is highly unethical!

An Apparent 14-Point Huddle

Playing weak 2-bids, 5 to 11 points, your partner opens 2♥ in favorable vulnerability and your RHO passes. You hold ♠ 5 3 2 ♥ A 10 4 ♦ A 9 6 ♣ 10 8 4 2. Clearly, the opponents can make a partial, or even a spade game, and LHO will surely balance if you pass. An immediate 3♥ call may block them, but it exposes your weakness. Ah, but a forcing 2NT may deceive them, especially if the opposing high cards are evenly divided. So you do it; so far, a perfectly legitimate course, because you are bluffing the opponents with the bid itself, not its tone or manner. But partner rebids 3♥, showing a good hand but poor hearts in your system and you have a problem: a pass in normal tempo will probably expose your psyche. You are tempted to

pause a bit, as though considering the odds of partner making game opposite your “sound opening bid,” and then pass. Perfectly horrible and completely unethical.

If this example seems a harmless bluff and isolated from actual cheating, consider this: a likely continuation after your pause might be a balancing double or a bid of 3♠, and partner may well bid again or double the opponents on the basis of your “values.” How do you keep partner out of the act? You don’t. Unless, of course, he/she has learned to read your “false hesitations” for what they are. That is the seed you have planted, and, given time, it will grow.

2. During the Play

Seeing Double

Here’s another one that many of us have suffered. You and dummy hold the following heart suit:

A J 8 3 } You lead the ♥ 10 toward dummy and LHO studiously examines his hand and
K T 9 5 } dummy before putting the ♥ 4 on the table. Convinced you’ve located the missing honor, you’re surprised when East produces her Majesty. When subsequent play reveals West held a singleton, you wonder if seeing double prevented him from playing his stiff in tempo. If not, then unless his heart was in with his diamonds, it’s in order to call the Director (nicely) to explain that such a “bluff” is highly unethical at the bridge table.

Should you ever find yourself daydreaming instead of expeditiously playing your stiff, feel free to mention that when you do wake up. You might add that you have no problem with the trick. Whatever you say in this situation, try to repeat words to that effect if and when the situation re-occurs.

Scoring Partner’s Stiff Honor

With the N-S suit layout depicted in *Seeing Double*, an astute but unethical West who holds 7 6 4 2 and who suspects partner might hold a singleton honor will deliberately tank with his four small, trying to convince declarer the finesse is “on.” If you’re sitting West in this layout or one similar and might or might not give count, try to make that decision before declarer tackles the suit. Be ready to smoothly play low when declarer leads the 10. (On the flip side, if you do hold the missing honor with one or more backers, ducking smoothly often induces declarer to rise in dummy and finesse on the way back. Sweet. Especially with Q doubleton.)

An Imaginary Ace

This is the hardest lesson to learn: even declarer is not permitted to deceive his opponents by the manner of his plays. In the present example, the auction proceeds 1♦-P-1♠-P-1NT-P-3NT, and the opening lead is the ♥ 6, in the following layout:

	♠ A Q 8 3	
	♥ K 5 2	
	♦ A 7 6	
	♣ 7 4 3	
♠ T 5		♠ J 9 6 2
♥ A T 7 6 3		♥ Q 9 4
♦ Q T 3		♦ J 5
♣ 8 6 2		♣ Q J T 9
	♠ K 7 4	
	♥ J 8	
	♦ K 9 8 4 2	
	♣ A K 5	

On the play of a low heart from dummy the right-hand defender puts up the Q, and declarer huddles before dropping the ♥ 8. How does this look to the right-hand defender? Exactly as if partner has led from ♥ J 10 7 6 3 and declarer has ducked with the ace, to maintain control. What does RHO do about it? Nine times out of ten he will switch to the ♣ Q, in the reasonable expectation that partner's one high card (which the auction marks him for) is in clubs. In that case, declarer will make his contract, aided by a blatant breach of ethics.

This is not to say that declarer must expose his hand to the opponents. He may think as long as he wishes, even with no problem whatsoever, before calling the first card from dummy. He may even hesitate over which of two cards from his hand would be the most deceptive; but when there is no choice, he may not create the appearance of one by hesitating. Thus, in the present example, the play of the ♥ J under the Q is patently ridiculous, and so could not reasonably have been the cause for his indecision.

The Hesitation's Counterpart — Fast Action

We've seen how hesitations can easily convey information unrelated to the actual bidding and play. The hesitation's counterpart — fast action — may also convey unauthorized information, information that the partner may not legally act upon.

Stop Card Warning Violations

Years ago, before bidding boxes existed, a verbal "Skip-Bid, Please Hesitate" warning was made part of duplicate bridge in the hope of eliminating the information passed, usually inadvertently, by the next player's reaction to the skip-bid. The advent of bidding boxes changed the verbal "Skip-Bid" warning into a Stop Card warning. Unfortunately, many players regard such a warning as an imposition, or else they treat it as a joke, visibly "timing" their pause, proclaiming thereby that they have no problem (which is just as illegal passage of information as any hesitation). Proper conduct, of course, is simply to wait several seconds (the law requires about 10 seconds) before acting, studying one's hand without undue expression.

Fast Pass

A partnership may choose not to use the Stop Card, either by explicit agreement or in practice. (If so, neither partner should use the Stop Card—ever—because selective use of the Stop Card in specific situations clearly conveys unauthorized information. Whatever you choose to do, be consistent!) A fast pass over a pre-empt, even in the absence of a Stop Card, is a clear indication of weakness, warning partner not to enter the auction without substantial values. Proper conduct still applies, so wait those several seconds before reaching for the bidding box. In balancing seat, partner should ignore the speed of your pass in deciding whether to reopen the auction, but styles in that position differ so widely that the Director can hardly ever rule a final pass to be unjustified.

Fast Bid or Double

If a fast pass over a pre-empt tells partner to “proceed with caution,” the fast bid or double must be “full speed ahead,” clearly announcing a hand close to ideal for the call that was made. Once again, the Director can hardly prevent the partner of the fast-actor from “trusting” him to have the values announced by his bid. So, as with the fast pass, we must rely heavily on education and self policing. As an individual at the table at the time of an infraction, you should enlist the aid of the Director in this educational effort by calling her to the table, explaining the situation, and asking her to state the ACBL’s policy covering fast actions over pre-empts.

The Principle of “Own Risk”

Our typical reaction to opponents’ fumbles and hesitations is to use them as heaven-sent clues to the location of the missing high cards, and to feel betrayed when it develops that an opponent was simply debating whether to give count, or had his hand missorted. Many people expect redress for damages, or at least immediate punishment of the offenders, when they act on an opponent’s hesitation and lose thereby. But the laws specifically state that players draw inferences from their opponents’ tone or manner at their own risk, for they are acting on information gained by means other than the actual bids or plays. Lest one think this gives the unscrupulous a license to steal, remember: players found guilty of repeated violations of ethics will be barred from play.

The “coffee-house” balk to deliberately mislead declarer is probably the most frequently encountered unethical action. Because there can be legitimate reasons for this action in any particular case, it is very hard to “nail” such an offender in the act. However, we do have one recourse: we can inform the Director of our conviction, preferably with the individual present. The Director then has a chance to discuss this sort of violation with the alleged offender and begin observations for further violations which ultimately will be reported to the Unit.

Conclusion

The path to minimizing damage from information-carrying hesitations lies in education and the application of active ethics, and should result in a more enjoyable game for all. We hope this paper has helped with the education aspect of the equation.