

Objective criteria to select a convention

Besides pre-emptive bids at 3 or 4 level , we have at our disposal only 10 opening bids, from 1♣ to 2 NT , to describe all possible hands we might have . How many different kind of hands could there be ? Here start the bad news ... One suited hands are 4 , 2 suited hands 6 , 3 suited hands 4 plus , finally , 1 balanced hand .

Hands can not be defined only according to their shape , point count is also a discriminating factor . We have therefore to take into account at least 3 point ranges : weak , medium and strong .

The total will add up to something over 40 different kind of hands to be described with only 10 opening bids .

The first consequence of such consideration , is that we have to give up the ambition , if we had any, to open one specific type of hand with one specific bid. We have to live with the fact that 1 bid will have to describe a *little group* of hands and not a single specific hand. With more than 40 different hands and only 10 opening bids , we can not do otherwise.

In building up a bidding system , we will have to assign to each bid a little group of hands , so that all possible hands are covered.. Each bid will therefore have a different meaning , according to the bidding system used .

Existing bidding systems are quite a few and conventions or treatments are even more numerous .

How to choose among the abundant offer available in literature ? How to make an objective selection among the various available alternatives ?

In order to be able to take a sound decision , we need objective criteria . We can not pretend to make an objective choice based on subjective feelings .

Let us try to make a pragmatic example. Let us see , for instance , the 2♦ opening bid.

In France , the large majority of bridge players , would open 2♦ a hand with 23+ HCP and any distribution . Such opening bid is defined, in France, as forcing to game .

In USA , a country of 25 million bridge players, a 2♦ opening bid shows, generally, a weak 2 , that is 6♦ , 6-10 HCP , 2 honours in the bid suit without a 4 cards major on the side. If you are used to play bridge on BBO , the first question you are asked , when playing with an occasional partner is : “ *Is SAYC ok ?* ” . SAYC is an acronym that stands for “*Standard American Yellow Card*” , a bidding system that uses in fact such opening bid.

There are also players using the Multicoloured 2♦. It is a multiple opening bid that shows the possession of weak 2♥ or 2♠ , plus 2 strong hands to be chosen among a strong 6 cards minor or a strong balanced hand or a strong 3 suited hand .

Somebody is using the Flannery 2♦, that is 11-15 HCP with 5♥ and 4♠ . If you open 1♥ , you could not reverse into 2♠ for lack of HCP , thus the Flannery justification.

You can still find some “*aficionados*” of strong old style 2♦ that is a 6 carder with 18+ HCP.

We have also the 2 suited 2♦ , promising 6-10 HCP and minimum 4-4 in majors .

I'll stop here because we already have quite a large choice .

For 2♦ opening bid we therefore have the choice among following meanings :

- 2♦ french style : any shape , 23+ HCP
- 2♦ american style: 6 carder with 2 honours, 6-10 HCP , without a 4 cards major.
- 2♦ multicolour = weak 2♥ or 2♠ plus 2 strong hands to be chosen among strong minor 6 carder, strong balanced hand or strong 3 suited hand.
- 2♦ Flannery = 11-15 , 5♥ + 4♠ .
- 2♦ strong = 6 carder and 18+ HCP
- 2♦ two suiter = 6-10 HCP with minimum 4-4 in majors.

How to make an objective choice among so many alternatives ? We need to have objective criteria . Here follow four objective criteria to be used in order to make a screening among the various alternatives available.

1st Criterion . Frequency of use .

The first question we should ask ourselves in front of any bid is “ *How often am I going to use it ?* ” . In other words how frequent is the hand described by such bid ?

About a couple of years ago , I was playing a team match in a local bridge Club and , at the same time , there was a gentleman teaching bridge . The teacher , that evening , was just explaining to his students , the meaning of 2♦ opening bid , “ *French style* ” . I still remember the exact words he said : “ *some people say that the use of this bid is quite rare but , in fact , is far more frequent that you might think ...* ” I was struck by what he said because it meant absolutely nothing .

When we ask ourselves about the frequency of use of a given bid , we do not need a vague qualitative answer . What we need is just a NUMBER and nothing else .

In order to obtain this number it is not necessary to get into complicated mathematical calculations , all numbers concerning Bridge have been already studied and are readily available on the web or in specialised books.

Probability to have a hand with 23+ HCP with any distribution is 1 out of 500 hands. This is the objective information we need in order to be able to compare the frequency of use of a given bid with other bids using the same denomination with different meanings .

Let us see what is the frequency of use for all possible meanings of 2♦ opening bid :

- 2♦ french style = 1 hand / 500
- 2♦ USA style = 1 hand / 70
- 2♦ multicolour = 1 hand / 25
- 2♦ Flannery = 1 hand / 280
- 2♦ strong = 1 hand / 200
- 2♦ two suited = 1 hand / 19

From this first analysis we can conclude that , all other characteristics being equal , there are 3 meanings of 2♦ opening bid that we can happily forget about : French style 2♦ , Flannery 2♦ and strong 2♦ . In fact , frequency of use of the 3 mentioned bids is so low , compared to the rest of the options , that we can certainly survive without it , in case no differences would surface in further analysis. We can not yet take a final decision but , thanks to the 1st criterion, we already have some objective clues.

2nd Criterion : specificity .

When an opening bid concerns a weak hand , such bid should be as specific as possible. Being weak , we have the need to clarify our hand to partner in one single shot . Unless forced by partner , we are not going to bid any further , thus the necessity to give as many information as possible to our partner so that he could decide what to do next. We can not in fact tell our partner “ *I am weak , I'll explain my hand later on ..*” Being weak , bidding space available is limited thus the need to be specific .

A good example is a weak 2 opening bid . In one shot we inform partner that we have a 6 carder ,with 2 honours , 6-10 HCP with no 4 card major on the side . Now partner knows all he needs to take the best decision , knowing that we shall not bid anymore unless he forces us.

When instead we have a strong hand , specificity is not required but , moreover, is not desirable . If we inform partner about our hand shape , we will give , at the same time , the same information to our opponents who will be delighted to know where to make the best lead .

Strong hands should not explain , strong hands should question .

If it would be allowed to show his own hand to partner , it would not be necessary for both partners to show their hands . It would be largely enough for only one player to show his hand to partner .

In Bridge , as we all know , such practice is not allowed and we use bidding to describe our hand to partner . In doing so , we obviously , at the same time , describe our hand also to opponents .

Since it is enough for only one hand to be described , it is much better for the weak hand to be described so that the strong hand remains unknown to opponents..

This type of reasoning has caused , during the past years, the flourishing of bidding systems making a large use of asking relays through which the strong hand asks the weak hand to describe itself .

3rd Criterion : defensibility .

When we bid , we occupy a given bidding level . We can bid at 1 level, 2 level or even higher . Such bidding level should be profitably defensible . That does not mean that we have to necessarily maintain the contract , it simply means that we have to concede to opponents the lowest possible score. If , for instance, we bid 4 ♠ and we come up 1 trick short while 4♥ are cold for our opponents , then we can certainly say to have profitably defended.

How could we know , *before playing the hand* , what would be the maximum bidding level at which we can profitably defend ? There is nothing new to be invented , this problem has been already studied and solved by the Law of Total Tricks (LTT)..

While the LTT interpretation and demonstration could sound a bit complicated , its application is very simple :

with 8 trumps on our line , we can profitably defend up to the 2 level.

with 9 trumps on our line , we can profitably defend up to the 3 level.

with 10 trumps on our line , we can profitably defend up to the 4 level.

It is important to note that LTT can be applied only to competitive bidding, that is when both lines compete for the contract. In other words we should use LTT only when HCP are more or less divided 20 / 20 between NS and EW or when the majority of HCP is with our opponents.

In fact, when we open with a weak 2, our bet is to find 2 cards support with our partner: $6 + 2 = 8$ and, with 8 trumps, we are at 2 level where, comfortably protected by LTT we shall be able to defend profitably.

Is this bet acceptable? Certainly, once again mathematics can give us the answer. If we start with a 6 carder, the probability of finding 2 cards support with partner is 77%. That means that 3 times out of 4 we will be protected by the Law.

4th Criterion : pre-emptive power.

Generally speaking, we can say that the more we bid, the more difficult will be for opponents to exchange information. The higher the bidding level, the tougher opponents communication will become.

When we examine a given bid, we have to evaluate, among other things, the pre-emptive power carried by such bid.

It is clear that pre-emptive power has to be used against opponents and not against our partner.

A 1♣ opening bid, even being the lowest possible available, has never the less a certain pre-emptive power because opponents are automatically deprived of the possibility of opening 1♣. If instead our opening bid is 3♠, its pre-emptive power is manifestly much higher: opponents will be forced to start exchanging information at 4 level, with all relevant draw backs.

Since, by definition, pre-emptive power must be used against opponents, it is advisable to use such power when opponents have the majority of HCP.

When we have a strong hand, it would not be very smart to pre-empt our partner and take away bidding space from him. It would certainly be advisable to leave him as much bidding space as possible so that he can explain in details his hand.

In this case it will be opponents role to pre-empt us and try to take away bidding space from us.

As a logical consequence of this, we can see how popular have become weak pre-emptive bids at 2 or 3 level.

In deciding a bidding system architecture, the two criteria of Defensibility and Pre-emptive power are constantly in a sort of trade off.

The fact to increase the pre-emptive power is certainly positive, the higher the better, but only at the condition that bids are profitably defensible. On the other hand, it is certainly a good thing to safeguard a bid defensibility but pre-emptive power should also be taken into account or else we would seldom bid, thus making our opponents quite happy.

Conclusion .

We should be specific when we describe a weak hand, while we should not be specific at all when our bid describes a strong hand. We also know that we have at our disposal only 10 precious opening bids to describe a total of over 40 different hands.

First thing to do is to take all strong hands and fit it in one single opening bid. We do not need to do otherwise: without the necessity of being specific we might as well group all strong hands together.

The second thing to do is to reserve the largest possible number of opening bids to describe weak hands : it is in fact with weak hands that we need to be specific.

The more bids we have at our disposal for weak hands , the more specific we shall be able to be. Even in doing so , we will not be able to describe specifically all weak hands and we shall therefore establish a priority list of weak hands starting from the ones having the highest frequency of use. We want to bid and pre-empt as frequently as possible thus the first criterion will come handy.

As far as our strong opening bid is concerned , we will use the lowest possible level available : we do not want to pre-empt our partner .

The opposite concept should be used for opening bids describing weak hands : here it is advisable to bid at the highest possible level in order to maximise pre-emptive power , obviously keeping an eye on the defensibility criterion.

There are numerous bidding systems that have been and are following the above mentioned guidelines . It all started with Neapolitan Club followed by Roman Club , Blue Team Club , Leghorn Diamond , Italia Diamond , Turin Club , Palermo Diamond , Precision , Polish Club , Viking Club and so on .

The various concepts here outlined, have been the guiding principles of bridge evolution during the past 50 years .

It has been quite a revolution since the Culbertson times . The 2 Suited Club has been build according to these principles and is the natural evolution of its predecessors .

I admit that all artificial systems based on strong club or strong diamond are certainly more complicated than natural systems like the very popular fifth major. Artificial systems require a bigger effort to memorise the various auction developments and are therefore more difficult to learn than natural systems . On the other hand , artificial systems are much easier to play than natural systems , thanks to the numerous information provided.

Not everybody wants to go through the hectic learning process of memorising all conventional openings , responses, re-bids and overcalls typical of an artificial bidding system . Nothing wrong with that , if this is the case, fifth major can always do the job . If we decide that an artificial system is too complicated for our once a week bridge game with friends , we can always stick to our simple bidding system but we should not close our eyes in front of 50 years of bridge innovation . We should at least try to play a modern fifth major where there is no need for 2 , 3 or 4 strong opening bids , but where one strong opening bid is more than enough. We should also try to use as many weak opening bids as possible in order to increase our bids specificity and pre-emptive power. Last but not least , in case we do not know it yet , we should try to get familiar with the LTT that has become a milestone of modern bridge . In doing that , we can certainly play a better bridge and , undoubtedly , can have more fun .