Conventional & Artificial Bidding

Advantages, Abuses, Applications Part 1

It seems appropriate enough to introduce a controversial issue with a few hands.



The 2NT opening is 0-10, 5+♣ 5+♦. On this layout, 5♦ is a laydown

At the other table



♦s were never introduced. E/W are down in 4♥ with routine defense.

On the next hand



The weak NT allows N/S a sacrifice against E/W’s optimal +120.

And finally



The extensive relays opposite the limited opener allow a slam to be bid confidently.

There are surely thousands of other hands that could be examined, but it is clear that bidding to correct contracts requires, in some form or another, conventional and artificial bids.

Wait... conventional and artificial? If you thought those terms were synonymous, they are not. As per the Encyclopedia of Bridge:

**Conventional:** A call given a specific agreement

**Artificial**: A call whose definition is unrelated to the strain of the call

The need for conventional calls is obvious. Without any sort of definition, bidding is meaningless. Information cannot be conveyed adequately without each side of the partnership saying and interpreting it correctly. There are even regional “meta rules”, or principle agreements, among bridge players that play similar systems locally. This prevents issues from arising in bidding scenarios that a new partnership has not discussed.

The need for artificiality is the more “debatable” aspect of bidding, even though it is just as essential as convention. Artificiality occurs primarily in areas where the “natural” occurrence is one or both of

* Infrequent
* Not profitable

The nearly universal application of Stayman is a direct result from the low frequency of needing to play in 2♣ after a 1N opening, in addition to the low gain of bidding 2♣. In similar fashion, takeout doubles are an improvement upon penalty doubles. Low level penalties are not as frequent as hands with shortness in the opposition’s suit. Plus, alternative routes to acquiring penalties exist with takeout doubles. This negates the potential losses associated with not playing direct penalty doubles.

More specifically, the question of where to apply artificial calls is answered by comparing the gain/loss ratios and consequences of applying various meanings to a bid. For example, how often will I gain by playing a strong ♣ as opposed to a natural 1♣? Determining this mathematically would take thousands of simulations of not just the alternatives for 1♣, but the consequentially limited 1♦/♥/♠ openings.

The complex interrelatedness of all the calls in the bidding sways most teachers/authors to recommend against quickly adding conventional/artificial agreements. In addition to the potential memory strain, there are other areas of the entire bidding system that may be negatively affected AND UNNOTICED by the aspiring bridge students wanting to adopt these methods. However, if a partnership can adequately memorize and identify the cause and effect of artificiality, then it should be applied where appropriate\*\*.

\*\* “Appropriate” takes into account other significant factors, including vulnerability, opponents, state of match, hand evaluation, and so on.