

How To Express Doubt In The Auction - I

Last week we heard about the value of expressing doubt. In a nutshell, it's a way of getting your partner's opinion on what to do when you aren't certain what you should be doing. This week I'm going to focus on the most common ways of expressing doubt. Or when translating an auction into English, "I don't know partner, what do you think?"

Non-Competitive Auctions

In non-competitive auctions, there's typically two things that we might have doubt about:

- What strain should we be playing in
- What level should we be playing at?

When we have doubt about strain, we almost always bid a new suit. Sometimes this ends up being conventional (ala new minor forcing or fourth suit forcing), but the action is still the same.

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|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|
| 1. | 1C-1H | 2. | 1C-1H | 3. | 1C-1H | 4. | 1C-1H |
| | 2C-3C | | 2C-2H | | 2C-2N | | 2C-2D |

All of these auctions start out the same way.

1C - I want to start a conversation and I have some clubs

1H - What do you think about hearts?

2C - I really think clubs should be trump and I don't have a lot of extra strength

It's the next bid that allows responder to express themselves.

In auctions 1-3, responder is making a natural and passable bid. In auction #4, responder is suggesting doubt about strain. It's possible that there's a diamond fit here, *but this bid does not have to promise diamonds*, it's merely an effort to continue the conversation and asks opener to further describe their hand.

How about if opener bids a second suit?

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|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|
| 1. | 1H-1S | 2. | 1H-1S | 3. | 1H-1S | 4. | 1H-1S |
| | 2C-3C | | 2C-2H | | 2C-2N | | 2C-2D |

Once again it's when responder bids a new suit that they are expressing doubt about strain.

1H - I think we should make hearts trump

1S - How about spades?

2C - Don't like them, what do you think about clubs?

When we have doubt about level and not strain, the most common thing we do is raise partner.

So think about these auctions:

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|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|-------|
| 1. | 1H-2H | 2. | 1H-2H | 3. | 1C-1H | 4. | 1C-1H |
| | 3H | | 3D | | 2H-3H | | 2H-3D |

In all of these auctions we've agreed that hearts should be trump. When the next player bids again they are generally not suggesting that anything else be trump, they are instead suggesting doubt about the level. In other words they want to try for the game bonus.

Let's consider this auction in light of what we just discussed:

1C-1H

2H-3D

3H-4H

1C - I want to start a conversation and I have some clubs

1H - What do you think about hearts?

2H - I like them, and while I was strong enough to open, I'm not much stronger than that

3D - I'm not sure that we can't make game in hearts, and I have some diamonds

3H - I don't want to be in game

4H - ?

Since responder could've just bid 4H instead of stopping off to bid 3D, this should no longer be a hand that just wants to be in game. Instead it shows that the doubt I had was whether or not we should be in 6H or 4H, not 3H or 4H. In other words the doubt about level was slam or game, not game or partscore.

This sort of thinking can help make sense of other seemingly Byzantine auctions:

1H-1S

2C-2D

2N-3C

1H - I think we should make hearts trump

1S - How about spades?

2C - Don't like them, what do you think about clubs?

2D - I have doubt, tell me more

2N - OK, I think we should play no trump

3C - ?

What is partner to think about that 3C bid? Obviously responder is suggesting clubs be trump. However, earlier responder expressed doubt by bidding 2D. Opener didn't show any more clubs, *so responder already knew that they wanted clubs to be trump when they bid 2D*. This insight helps us to understand that the doubt partner had wasn't so much about strain as it was about level. They are interested in playing in clubs and are suggesting that with the right hand you might want to be in 6C.

Once you approach auctions with the concept of doubt, all you need to figure out is "What was partner uncertain of?", when trying to understand their actions.