

UTR

(Universal Transfer Responses)

It's a war out there! Modern bidding has become so intensely competitive that an uncontested auction has become a rarity. Yet modern American bidding has not evolved to keep pace with the added complexity of competitive auctions. Rather than adopting a basic structure designed specifically for competitive auctions, the leading players have chosen to graft additional layers of complexity upon bidding structures designed originally for mainly non-competitive auctions. As a result, the system notes of the leading pairs have expanded, often reaching several hundred pages. This in turn places added pressure on the ACBL's alerting procedure, and makes it virtually impossible for tournament officials to ensure that players have an adequate understanding of their opponents' methods. At best they will be able to understand the meaning of the bids actually made by the opponents, but will have no knowledge of the meaning of the alternative actions rejected by the opponents in favor of the calls actually chosen. It was the availability of such negative inferences that made bridge so popular during its Golden Era when everyone played virtually the same system.

This complexity issue is a challenging area for bidding theorists. I began to grapple with these problems during the reign of the famous Italian Blue Team, and in 1981 published a defensive bidding system called *3-D*. That system defined three different bidding structures, with the choice of structure dependent upon the number of real suits shown by the opposing side at the time of our first competitive action. Then, in the *MAFIA Club* system, published in conjunction with *3-D*, I was able to use much of the *3-D* structure to counter opposing interference, thus avoiding the complexity of the patchwork approach used by the leading players.

The complexity issue has grown even more burdensome in the twenty years since *3D and the MAFIA Club* was published. In those ensuing years, my research has focused mainly on finding various ways in which transfer bids can be applied to improve accuracy and/or reduce complexity. A useful classification scheme for transfer bids is described in the article called *Transfer Taxonomy*, which can be found on the Outer Space page of this website. The present document will propose a complete revision of the modern American 5-card Major response structure by using 5-suit transfers (NT→C, C→D, D→H, H→S, and S→NT). In uncontested auctions, *Transfer Taxonomy* calls this scheme T5C, where the T shows that it's a transfer scheme, the 5 means 5-suit transfers, and the C means that the transfers are conditional (partner is free to accept or reject the transfer depending on his overall strength and his holding in the target suit). A T5A scheme would describe 5-suit absolute transfers, which partner **must** accept. In contested auctions, the notation becomes XT5C, where the X indicates that over opposing intervention, a Double or Redouble is a transfer to the cheapest suit, and the next four bids complete the set of 5-suit transfers. It is possible also to use a notation such as XT5C→3D to indicate that Double is a transfer so long as the intervention is no higher than 3D, but becomes a penalty double at higher levels.

Note: Although *UTR* will be described in terms of a modern American 5-Card Major bidding structure, *UTR* can be used with equal effectiveness in conjunction with any bidding system using mainly natural opening bids, but not, of course, with relay systems or other mainly artificial systems.

The Basic UTR Structure

Introduction

This structure applies after any natural opening bid in a suit (not NT) below the 3-level, provided Opener's LHO passes. It also can be applied after an artificial 2C opening bid provided either:

- (a) Responder has made a negative or waiting (normally 2D or a super-negative 2H) or control-showing or (perish the thought) HCP-showing response, and Opener has rebid in a suit below game.
- (b) Responder can visualize a possible slam and thus chooses not to make a waiting or negative response.

This structure does **not** apply after an opening bid in NT, or after any artificial opening bid that does not specify length in some specific suit. It can, however, be applied after a Weak Two Bid, or an artificial bid such as a Flannery 2D, which specifies 5 hearts and 4 spades, again assuming that Opener's LHO passes.

A similar structure applies in those cases where Opener's LHO does **not** pass. Some relatively minor modifications must be applied in that case. Those modifications will be described in the section that follows the basic rules.

The Basic Rules

(0) This is the ultimate rule. Opener should accept a transfer if he would be content should Responder pass after his acceptance. Thus, non-acceptance of a transfer raise implies extra strength beyond what was shown by his opening bid. Non-acceptance of a transfer to NT implies either an unbalanced hand or extra strength or both, while non-acceptance of a transfer to a new suit implies either a lack of fit for that suit or extra strength or both. Similarly, Responder passes Opener's acceptance of a transfer unless he has additional strength. Rule (0) was only rule used during the Initial Test. All of the eleven rules below are the logical consequence of this ultimate rule, and are provided here mainly to illustrate how to apply this ultimate rule.

(1) The next five bids above Opener's bid are 5-suit conditional transfers: NT transfers to clubs, clubs transfers to diamonds, diamonds transfers to hearts, hearts transfers to spades, and spades transfers to NT. There is only one transfer bid permitted in each auction. After a minor suit opening, a 1D or 1H transfer to a major can be based on a 4-card major Q10xx or better. All other transfers to a suit imply a 5-card suit, but do not assure it. If such a transfer is accepted, Responder's rebid of NT at any level denies a 5-card major.

(2) Opener is expected to accept a transfer to a new suit if he has at least 3-card support for that suit, but failure to accept the transfer does not necessarily deny 3-card support. Opener can accept by jumping in the target suit to show substantial excess strength (invitational), or he can bid a new suit (forcing) and show support later. Once Opener declines the transfer, all new suit bids by either partner are forcing until suit agreement or a natural NT bid..

(3) If Opener accepts the transfer without jumping, Responder is free to pass, but can bid again with excess strength. Responder's bid in that case is forcing for one round if it is in a new suit, but is merely invitational if it is in a suit previously bid by either partner. Further new suit bids by Responder are forcing, but new suits by Opener are not, since he has limited his hand by accepting the transfer. After accepting the transfer, Opener's only force is a jump in a new suit.

(4) A transfer to Opener's suit shows 3-card support, but a weak hand with longer support is possible (see below). Opener will normally accept, but with excess strength, he can jump-accept, or bid a new suit (forcing) to invite game. After the transfer raise, any further bid by Responder is a forcing game try.

(5) A transfer to NT initially denies 3-card support for Opener's major, or 4-card support for Opener's minor, but if followed by a jump in Opener's suit, Responder shows a game-forcing balanced hand with 4+ card support. With 4-card support, but lacking the strength for a game force, Responder must make a transfer raise instead of transferring to NT first. Opener is expected to accept (or jump accept) the transfer to NT with a balanced hand (5332, 6322, or 5422 shape, or perhaps 5431 with a singleton A, K, or Q, for a major opening; or 5332, 4432, or 4333 for a minor opening). If unbalanced, Opener can bid a second suit, rebid his suit (with 6331, 6421, or a 6322 hand better suited for play in the major than in NT), or bid a 7-card suit, jumping with substantial excess strength.

(6) If Responder chooses not to make a transfer bid, his bid will be a jump of some sort. A jump to 2NT after a major suit opening is forcing, and will be expected to show something like a balanced 12-14 or 13-15 HCP (depending on whether Opener makes light opening bids). A jump to 4NT on the next round shows a balanced 18-19 HCP. A jump to 3NT shows a balanced 15-17 HCP (or 16-18 if the opening can be light. The same strength requirements can be used after a minor suit opening, but many pairs will prefer the modern treatment in which the 2NT jump shows 11-12 HCP and invites 3NT, while a jump to 3NT shows 13-15 HCP, and a jump to 4NT shows 16-17 HCP.

A single jump in a new suit is a mini-splinter raise, showing a singleton in the new suit, with 11+ HCP and 4+ card support, and denies a good 5+ card side suit that might provide a source of tricks for a slam. A double jump in a new suit shows the same hand with a void in the new suit.

A jump raise of Opener's major to the 3-level or 4-level is weak and preemptive, with the strength depending on vulnerability. Opener will expect a maximum of one defensive trick for this bid.

A jump raise of Opener's minor denies a 4-card major and shows a balanced hand with opening bid strength and 4+ card support. Opener will bid 3NT with stoppers in both majors, or bid a major suit stopper if weak in the other major, or bid the other minor to invite game in his minor, or bid his minor at the 4-level to show a shapely minimum with no real hope for game unless Responder has extra strength.

(7) In an auction already forcing to game, any jump in a new suit by either partner is a splinter, with support for at least one suit previously bid by partner. A double jump in a new suit is Exclusion Keycard, usually showing a void, and asking for controls outside the suit of the jump.

Additional Rules When Opponents Compete

These rules apply when the competitive action is no higher than 2S. Above that level, all competitive action by Opener's side is natural, and all doubles are penalty-oriented.

(A) When Opener's LHO Bids Instead of Passing

(8) If LHO Doubles, or makes a non-jump suit bid (even a cue-bid of Opener's suit), a Double or Redouble is a transfer to the next suit (or NT), and the next four bids complete the set of 5 transfer bids. The Redouble of a takeout double frees the bid of Opener's suit at the 2-level, which in the absence of competition would be the last transfer bid. I suggest using this non-transfer raise of Opener's suit as a fairly balanced 3-card limit raise with 9-11 HCP and some defensive potential.

(9) When LHO has shown a suit, Opener should accept a transfer to NT only if holding at least a partial stopper (Qx or Jxx minimum). Opener should accept a transfer to any suit bid naturally (or implied artificially) by his LHO only with a full stopper (Ace or QJx or better). When holding the required stopper, Opener has the option of accepting the transfer so that Responder can become the NT declarer, or of bidding NT himself, depending on which partner is least vulnerable to attack. This rule applies whether

LHO's bid was natural or artificial, so long as his artificial bid specified one or more real suits (e.g., a Michaels Cue-Bid). If LHO's bid was artificial, "LHO's suit" above means his real suit, not the suit that he bid artificially.

(10) After Responder's transfer, as well as in those auctions in which Responder chooses not to transfer, all Doubles by either Opener or Responder are for penalty. With UTR there is no need for Negative Doubles, Responsive Doubles, Support Doubles, etc.

(B) When Opener's RHO Intervenes After Responder's Transfer

(11) If the intervention is a Double, all sequences have the same meaning they would have had in the absence of the double; a Redouble implies acceptance of the target suit with extra strength, but not enough for a jump acceptance. Any other non-jump interference forces Opener one level higher if he wishes to accept the transfer, so acceptance implies a sound opening bid, but perhaps not as strong as a jump acceptance in the absence of competition. After acceptance, new suits by either partner are natural and forcing one round. After non-acceptance, new suits by either partner show non-minimum hands, but are not forcing, and new-suit jumps are forcing to game, as is a cue-bid of the opponent's suit, which implies interest in 3NT. All Doubles are penalty, and guarantee a stopper in the opponent's suit in case partner is interested in 3NT instead of a penalty..

Opener's Strategy After the Transfer

Since these are conditional transfers, Opener will usually accept a transfer to a new suit with 3+ card support, and can accept with a jump (invitational) or a jump to game (to play). Opener *may* accept with a doubleton Q or better if his own suit is weak. Lacking support, Opener will rebid his suit, jumping to the 3-level (to invite), or to game (to play); or Opener will bid a new suit or a non-jump NT (non-forcing), or jump in a new suit (forcing), or jump to 3NT (to play).

If Responder has transferred to Opener's major, Opener will accept the transfer with a minimum and no game aspirations, but can bid a new suit (forcing game try) or 2NT (balanced game try, usually 5332), or jump in a new suit (game force, possible slam try), or jump to game in the major or in NT.

If Responder has transferred to NT, Opener will usually accept with a more or less balanced hand (5332, 6322, 5422, 4432, 4333), but with a singleton or void or two unstopped suits, he might choose to rebid his suit (usually 6331 or 7+) or bid a new suit (usually distributional, but might be 5422 or 6322 with the other two suits unstopped).

If Opener declines a transfer to a new suit, bids a third suit, and later supports a suit introduced by Responder, this shows invitational strength, since he would have accepted with a minimum.

Responder's Strategy After the Transfer

Responder is unlimited (unless he is a passed hand), so any new suits are forcing. The transfer raise followed by a new suit is a game try, allowing a stop at the 3-level if Opener is weak. A new-suit transfer followed by a minimum bid of Opener's major is forcing if Opener accepted the transfer, but is merely a preference otherwise. A new-suit transfer followed by a minimum NT bid is invitational if Opener accepted the transfer, but shows a misfit if Opener did not accept. A new-suit transfer followed by a rebid of the suit

shown by the transfer is invitational if Opener accepted the transfer, but is a sign-off (usually with a singleton or void in Opener's major), if Opener did not accept.

If a transfer to NT is accepted, Responder can pass or raise or bid a new suit (or jump in Opener's suit to show the balanced 4-card forcing raise). The new suit shows a semi-solid suit, usually with 6 cards, suggesting game in NT if Opener has one of the three top honors. If the transfer to NT is not accepted, a new suit by Responder denies 2-card support for Opener's major, and is not forcing.

In competitive auctions, if Opener's LHO has bid a suit, a transfer to NT can be made with only a partial stopper (Qx or Jxx or better), since Opener needs a partial stopper to accept. To find a full stopper in Opener's hand, Responder should transfer to the opponent's suit; Opener needs a full stopper to accept, or can bid NT directly depending on which partner should be declarer. This strategy will usually lead to the correct placement of the NT contract, assuming that NT is indeed the correct contract.

When Responder Does Not Transfer (NT Jumps)

2NT - This shows a balanced 13-15 HCP (or 19+ if followed by 4NT). Shape is 4333, 4432, or perhaps 5332 with a weak 5-card suit, and does not deny 4-card support (which will be shown on the next round), but would have 3-card support only if 4333, since 4432 with 3-card support would usually prefer to start with a transfer raise followed by a NT jump, asking Opener to choose between 3NT and game in the major.

3NT - This shows a balanced 16-18 HCP, usually with 4333 shape, but without 4-card support.

When Responder Does Not Transfer (New Suit Jumps)

New suit jumps start with 2D after 1C, 2H after 1D, 2S after 1H, or with 3C after 1S) - These are splinter raises, showing a singleton with 4-card support and about 11-14 HCP, while tending to deny a useful 5+ card side suit as a potential source of tricks for slam. Note that these are one level lower than traditional splinter raises, so that the double new suit jump (the traditional splinter) can now be used to show 4-card support with a void. Stronger splinter raises (15+ HCP) can be shown by a transfer raise followed by a jump in a new suit with a singleton, or a double jump in a new suit with a void. They are forcing to game with a major suit fit, or to 3NT or the 4-level if the fit is in a minor.

Jump Raises

A jump raise of Opener's major to the 3-, 4-, or 5-level is weak and preemptive. Opener will expect an absolute maximum of 1 1/2 defensive tricks, and should not be disappointed with less if the jump is to game or above.

A jump raise of Opener's minor to the 3-level shows opening bid strength with 4+ card support and no 4-card major. Opener will bid 3NT with both majors stopped, or rebid the other minor to try for game in the original minor, or for slam in the minor or in NT. A rebid of a major at the 3-level by Opener suggests doubt about 3NT, usually because of the lack of a stopper in the major suit not bid.

Bidding Strategy in Later Rounds

Each partner continues to describe his hand until someone figures out where to play the hand and places the contract, either by passing or by making a shutout bid; or until both partners choose to let the opponents play the hand, either doubled or undoubled.. Responder will usually be able to distinguish between 3- and 4-card support by starting with a transfer raise with 3-card support, or by using a splinter bid, or a transfer to NT followed by a jump raise, to show 4-card support, but this is not always possible; so Responder will sometimes feel compelled to use a transfer raise with 4-card support instead of the 3-card support Opener will expect. Opener's bidding follows traditional lines except for the decision about accepting or rejecting a transfer.

Conclusion

That's it! A complete 5-card Major Response Structure capable of handling interference by the opponents, based on one ultimate rule, and described in a less than 6 pages by means of a set of eleven simple rules. We'll also need a defensive bidding structure so that we can interfere in the opponents' auctions when they make the opening bid instead of us. But that will be covered in another document that will appear in due course. Stay tuned.