

# FENCING ACTIONS - TERMINOLOGY, THEIR CLASSIFICATION AND APPLICATION IN COMPETITION

*Motto: "Being able to give proper names to things is the first step toward wisdom." Confucius*

*"To look is not the same as to see, to see is not the same as to perceive. We perceive, really - on a higher, conceptual-functional level - only what we know, understand well and can give a name to." Zbigniew Czajkowski*

## INTRODUCTION

For the understanding of fencing actions, and especially of tactics and their application in a bout, and for the effective and rational conducting of fencing exercises it is necessary, to fully understand the theory of training, to know and understand the classification of fencing actions and their application in fighting. This is especially important in countries where there are many foreign fencing coaches (for example, the United States) who use the terminology of their schools - which vary in meaning from school to school and is also sometimes outdated and confusing. One cannot describe modern fencing - teaching, training and tactics - using only the 19th Century terminology of Luigi Barbassetti, great master as he was in his day, simply because many present concepts, practices, exercises and tactical skills were not known at that time. In this paper I am going to give my views on modern fencing and a modified classification of fencing actions - a basic classification of fencing actions and a classification based on tactical intentions. My ideas on the subject are based on nearly seventy years of the practice of fencing, my experience as both a competitor and coach, as a lecturer at the Fencing Department at the Academy of Physical Education in Katowice and innumerable courses, seminars and workshops for coaches conducted in Poland and many countries abroad.

Risking the accusation of having a lack of modesty, I shall quote David Tischler, the famous professor at the Moscow Institute of Physical Culture - and an excellent fencer and coach in the past - "The terminology and classification of fencing actions introduced some years ago by Professor Zbigniew Czajkowski is very logical, comprehensive, takes into account the modern development of fencing and has great practical value."

In a bout, the fencer's thoughts and attention are concentrated on many elements such as: watching the opponent, general assessment of the opponent's style and strength, reconnoitring his movements and intentions in various stages of the bout; the planning of one's own actions, the concrete, detailed, practical tasks in order to score the next hit, misleading the opponent about one's own intentions, etc. These objects of the fencer's attention are only a few examples of the whole complexity of tactical tasks which occur in a bout in close interrelation with each other.

Observation of the opponent plays a vital role in tactics. It becomes more precise, comprehensive and penetrating when the fencer has learned to see, perceive and understand the opponent's movements, psychological state and intentions, very often gaining the information from barely discernible cues such as change of stance, certain delicate

movements, preparatory actions and so on. It is particularly important to understand the opponent's intentions, guessing and foreseeing his tactics. To achieve this, it is indispensable to have a combination of tactical perception and the knowledge of fencing theory as well as the necessary level of self-control to see and think calmly in spite of emotional tension. Without the deep understanding of the tactical significance of various fencing actions, watching a fencing competition is very superficial, not very useful and may become even boring as the blade actions and movements of the two antagonists are rather incomprehensible.

A fencer who can foresee his opponents intentions will not easily be taken by surprise and may prepare better his/her own plan of action. After the successful reconnaissance of the opponent, one may plan one's own actions, taking advantage of one's own strong-points and the opponent's weak-points.

Before discussing the application of various fencing actions in a bout, it is necessary to introduce certain classifications of them. Here I am going to describe and discuss two systems of classifications of fencing actions:

1. The basic, fundamental, classification of fencing actions
2. Tactical classifications of fencing actions (from the point of view of tactics; the psychological base of choosing certain fencing strokes in a bout; fencer's intentions).

## **THE BASIC CLASSIFICATION OF FENCING ACTIONS**

All fencing actions applied in a bout may be divided into two main categories:

1. Preparatory actions.
2. Actual actions (real or ultimate actions).

### **Preparatory Actions**

Preparatory actions are the numerous and various fencing actions not intended to score a hit, directly or indirectly, but facilitating and preparing the successful application of actual (real) actions. Preparatory actions serve the following purposes:

1. Assessment of the opponent and orientation in the psychological and factual situations in the bout.
2. Concealing one's own intentions.
3. Misleading the opponent and using tactical feints.
4. Drawing certain actions from the opponent and trying to influence his movements.
5. Manoeuvring, gaining the feel of play, gaining the initiative, preparing one's own attacks and other actions.
6. Hindering the opponent's concentration, assessment of distance, etc.

### **Actual Actions**

Actual actions are ultimate, specific actions intended to ward off a hit or to score a hit, directly or indirectly (see below: discussion of first and second intention). From the point of view of the most elementary tactical application, the actual actions can be divided into: **offensive actions**, **defensive actions** and **counter-offensive** (offensive-defensive, counter-attacks ).

**Offensive actions** comprise:

1. Attacks.
2. Ripostes.
3. Counter-ripostes.
4. Counter-time.
5. Renewed offensive actions (remise, reprise, redouble).

**Counter-offensive actions** comprise:

1. Point-in-line (arm straight and point threatening the opponent's target).
2. Counter-attacks (stop-hit, stop-hit with opposition, derobe, stop-hit with evasion, and compound counter-attack-feint of stop-hit, deceive the parry and feint of derobe, derobe-which is called feint in time).

**Defensive actions** comprise:

1. Parries.
2. Evasions.
3. Retreats (defence with distance).

(The basic classification of fencing actions is represented on **Table 3**.)

If, at first, this classification system seems complicated, consider the terminology of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century rapier play which was even more complex and colourful as shown by the following quotation:

*Thy fincture, carricade, and sly passatos,  
Thy stramazone, and revolving stoccata,  
Wiping mandritta, closing embrocatta,  
And all the cant of the honorable fencing mystery<sup>1</sup>*

The understanding of fencing actions and their application in fighting becomes simpler and better understood when one realises that all fencing actions, even the most complicated ones, consist of four groups of component parts. They are:

1. On guard position and displacements (all variety of steps, lunge, fleche).
2. Basic hand positions (in the thrusting weapons, positions one through eight-four are in supination: sixth, fourth, eight, seventh, and four in pronation: third, second, fifth, and first; in sabre, the main positions are one through five<sup>2</sup>).
3. Change of weapon position (used as engagements, bindings, presses, beats and blade transfers and, of course, parries).
4. Fundamental, basic thrust and cuts.

The basic arm-hand positions in thrusting weapons (parries) are presented in **Table 1**.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) - English writer and one of the promoters of the Christian Socialist movement. This quotation is from his book *Westward Ho*.

<sup>2</sup> There is also, in sabre, a sixth position which is very seldom used.

**Table 1** *The Basic Arm-Hand Positions in Thrusting Weapons (Parries)*

<b>Area of Valid Target</b>	<b>Hand in Suppination</b>	<b>Hand in Pronation</b>
Outside High Line	Parry 6 (sixte)	Parry 3 (tierce)
Inside High Line	Parry 4 (quarte)	Parry 1 (prime)
Outside Low Line	Parry 8 (octave)	Parry 2 (seconde)
Inside Low Line	Parry 7 (septime)	Parry 5 (quinte - <i>French School</i> )

*One should mention the ninth position-ninth parry, in French School, known as high septime or "demi-cercel"; in Italian school called quinte or "mezzo-cerchio".*

The basic thrusts can be executed as direct thrusts (without change of line) or as indirect thrusts (with change of line). Indirect thrusts may be accomplished by disengagement, counter-disengagement or cut-over (coupe). In sabre, thrusts can be used but, much more often, cuts are employed. The basic cuts of sabre include: cut to head, cut to cheek, cut to flank, cut to chest and various cuts to the arm.

The basic thrusts are simple movements (one movement, one "tempo"). The direct thrust begins and ends in the same line, without any change of line in between. In other words, it is a straight extension of the arm conducting the weapon directly towards the target (which may be executed, of course, with different varieties of footwork). Direct thrusts, applied as an offensive action on our own initiative, is a direct attack. A direct thrust, executed after successfully parrying the opponent's attack is called direct riposte. A direct thrust, executed directly after successfully parrying the opponent's riposte is counter-riposte. A direct thrust executed into the opponent's attack is a variety of counter-attack, called stop-hit. A direct thrust applied as a continuation of the attack in the same line, is a remise. A direct thrust may also be used as a thrust: feint of direct attack, feint of counter-attack, etc.

Disengagement and cut-over are indirect thrusts which end in a new line. With disengagement we avoid the opponent's blade near the guard and with cut-over we avoid the opponent's blade near its point with a cutting movement. Counter-disengagement is executed on the opponent's change of engagement or any circular movement (for example, a circular parry) and it ends in the same line from which it began but constitutes an indirect thrust because it must first avoid the opponent's circular movement.

Regarding the complexity of movements, all fencing actions may be divided into **simple actions** (one movement) and **compound actions** (more than one movement). This classification applies only to the number of movements and the simplicity or complexity of their execution. From the point of view of tactics and the fencer's intention in a bout, this classification system - simple, compound - accepted by all fencing schools, may sometimes be slightly misleading as it does not reflect the fencer's intentions. For example, a simple action from a technical perspective (basic description of actions) may be the result of a rather complicated tactical process whereas a compound technical action may be a tactically straightforward solution (for example, first intention compound attack).

Generally, however, you may state that simple actions consist of one movement of the weapon while compound actions comprise more than one movement of the weapon (for example, compound attack or a thrust preceded by actions on the opponent's blade).

Here it must be mentioned that in the French school, all actions on the blade (engagement, pressure, beats, bindings, transfers) are considered as preparatory actions-so called, preparation

of the attack. In my opinion, actions on the blade ought to be considered as preparatory only when they fulfil the purposes listed previously under *Preparatory Actions* (hindering the opponent's concentration, trying to assess how strongly or lightly the opponent holds the weapon, disturbing his attention, etc.). Actions on the blade ought to be considered an integral, introductory part of a compound attack when the beat, binding, pressure or transfer is followed smoothly and immediately by a thrust, cut or feint. In other words, when the action on the blade and the following part of the attack form one technical and tactical unit and are executed fluently, they should be classified as a compound action (for example, fourth-beat and disengagement in foil, sixth-binding and direct thrust with opposition in epee, fourth-beat and cut to head in sabre, etc.).

When discussing the application of actual actions in a bout, one should bear in mind that they may be executed on one's own initiative (offensive actions) or as a response to the opponent's initiative (defensive and counter-offensive actions).

Offensive actions are executed on one's own initiative, except riposte. In a bout the parry and subsequent riposte are composed of first a defensive action and then an offensive action. Parry and riposte form one technical and tactical unit in which parry is defensive and riposte is offensive.

In a competition, the actual actions are easily seen and understood and are more spectacular and obvious in their technical execution. For these reasons, technique is much more often discussed and noticed and more attention is paid to technical development in the training process, particularly in the individual lesson. The preparatory actions are practised much less. Such an attitude is highly "unjust" to preparatory actions as the success of actual actions depend to a large extent on speed an accuracy of perception and judicious use of preparation. The preparatory efforts of a fencer often take a lot of time in a bout (especially so in epee) and they constitute not only the background of the bout but also form an integral part of the tactics. To an onlooker who does not know fencing, preparatory actions, full of concentration, manoeuvring on the strip, misleading the opponent, waiting for an opportunity to take the opponent by surprise, very often seem incomprehensible. This is why we often hear such comments from the lay public as: *Nothing is happening. Both fencers jump about and suddenly throw themselves at each other, shout, throw their masks off and look with triumph or anxiety at the referee.*

Preparatory actions are an extremely important factor in deciding the struggle in the fencing bout and the fencer must know, understand and practice these actions. Still, even nowadays, in the training of the vast majority of fencers, there exists a paradoxical situation in which exercises include only the more easily seen and understood actual actions to the detriment of the equally important preparatory actions.

In a modern fencer's training the fencing master should introduce special tactical exercises including learning and perfecting preparatory actions as well as shaping various technical-tactical and tactical skills.

One of the very important tasks of preparatory actions is to gain maximal information about one's opponent-his/her style of fencing, favourite strokes, his/her strong and weak points, etc. While trying to obtain maximum information about the opponent, the fencer should take strong advantage of general (tactical) feints (as distinct from feints of thrusts or cuts used as a part of a real compound action that draw the opponent's parry in order to deceive it and score in the opening area of the target or to draw a counter-attack, to apply the appropriate variety of counter-time). Tactical or general feints are the stances, changes of position, movements and actions intended to supply information about the opponent, to mislead the opponent and to make it difficult for the adversary to understand or predict the fencer's actions.

Such tactical feints include not only movements of the weapon arm but actions on the blade, movements of the legs and trunk, false attacks, etc. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that the fencer's skill in tactics is displayed to a large degree by the ability to mislead an opponent, to recognise the opponent's intentions and to discern any attempts to be misled.

Plans and tactical tasks in a bout ought to be changeable and adaptable to various tactical situations and in accordance with the nature of the opponent. The ways to mislead the opponent - the real feints, feints of thrusts or cuts which are meant to illicit certain movements from the opponent - may be generally divided into two categories: **first degree tactical feints** (direct feints) and **second degree tactical feints** (indirect feints). The following examples will illustrate the point.

#### **First Degree Tactical Feint (Direct Feint)**

*Foil* - During preparation, Fencer A has led the opponent to believe that a compound attack composed of multiple cut-overs is his intention. At the beginning of Fencer A's actual attack, the opponent, sensing the opportunity, counter-attacks with a stophit. Fencer A, who has been expecting this response, parries the counter-attack and scores with a riposte, thus executing countertime.

*Sabre* - Fencer A commences a compound attack and, apparently unwittingly, slightly exposes his forearm. Fencer B tries to hit the "carelessly" exposed forearm with a stop-cut. Fencer A, expecting to draw this movement, parries the stop-cut and scores a hit with the riposte, thus executing a variety of counter time.

#### **Second Degree Tactical Feint (Indirect Feint)**

*Foil* - Fencer A jumps forwards with the point of the foil raised high with an "apparent" attempt to draw and parry Fencer B's stophit (simple counter-attack). Fencer B, sensing the "trap", executes a compound counter-attack (he wants to execute feint of stop-hit-deceiving the parry; Italian "finta in tempo"). Just as Fencer B begins the execution of the compound counterattack, Fencer A finishes his movement with a direct thrust which causes Fencer B to fail as the counter-time of Fencer A arrives on B's first movement (feint of counter-attack).

*Sabre* - Fencer A, beginning his attack, uncovers his forearm in such an obvious and spectacular manner that the opponent cannot fail to notice purposefulness of the "mistake". Fencer B expecting a trap in the form of a parry by Fencer A (counter-time), attempts to apply a compound counter-attack (feint of stop-hit - deceiving the parry, "finta in tempo"). As Fencer B executes a feint of stop-hit, with an intention to deceive the expected parry, Fencer A executes a stop-cut during Fencer B's first movement.

These are also examples of second intention actions, executed by counter-time.

### **CLASSIFICATION OF FENCING ACTIONS FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THEIR TACTICAL APPLICATION**

The psychological basis (perception and ways of choosing the actions) of applying the actual actions in the bout lead to the division of these actions into three groups:

1. Foreseen actions.
2. Unforeseen actions.
3. Partly foreseen actions.

### **Foreseen Actions** (preconceived or premeditated actions)

1. First intention actions (foreseen actions of first intention).
2. Second intention actions (Foreseen actions of second intention).

These terms are generally well-known. Generally, foreseen actions are the actions executed according to a previously chosen plan-motor program (see Table 3). Additional explanations are given while discussing attacks.

### **Unforeseen Actions** (spontaneous or unpremeditated actions)

These actions are automatic, mostly applied in the form of defensive or counter-offensive actions. They are executed as "reflex"-motor response to unexpected offensive actions from the opponent - usually in the form of parry or counter-attack "on the spur of the moment". This is a response to an opponent's action which was neither expected nor foreseen.

### **Partly Foreseen Actions** (actions containing both foreseen and unforeseen parts)

1. Actions, mostly attacks, with a known beginning but an unknown ending, so-called "open-eyes attacks".
2. Actions, mostly attacks, with change of intention during their execution.

In partly foreseen actions, the beginning is known and foreseen and the final part is unforeseen. The two above mentioned varieties of partly foreseen actions superficially are very similar and yet there is a striking difference between them. An open-eyes action begins with a foreseen and planned movement (feint or action on the blade) and ends according to the opponent's reaction. Actions with a change of decision are conceived, initially programmed and put into execution as preconceived actions (either first or second intention) and then, under the influence of the opponent's unexpected movement, are changed mid-way.

(The classification of fencing action from the point of view of their tactical application in a bout is presented in **Table 4**.)

## **ATTACKS**

The most efficacious means of fighting are offensive actions - above all attacks. In all weapons, the majority of fencers score the largest amount of hits by attacks (although the ratio of applied and successful attacks varies among different fencers). The simple attack, especially direct attack, is both efficacious and powerful, but is quite difficult to bring off. The necessary conditions for its successful applications are: the right timing and taking the opponent by surprise ("à-propos", "sceltadi tempo"), correctness of execution, absence of unnecessary muscular tension, not betraying one's intentions, speed of execution and acceleration.

In a bout, an important element is the struggle of both fencers to seize the right opportunity for an attack (tempo, à propos, taking the opponent by surprise). The timing of the attack is equally important in compound attacks - the feint should take the opponent by surprise, "forcing" him to take a parry.

The importance and superiority of an attack as compared to other fencing actions, reside in the fact that the attacker is able to choose a moment and situation when he/she is fully ready, has the initiative and is highly concentrated. Conversely, the defender, very often is taken by surprise at the moment inconvenient for him/her (i.e. while he/she is off balance, not fully concentrated, not expecting the opponent's attack, preparing his/her own attack, etc.). A second

factor which enhances the advantage of an attack, especially in sabre fencing, is that an attacker is quite often able to change his/her movements (change of intention) while executing a foreseen offensive action. A fencer who is being attacked, especially when taken by surprise, has considerably less opportunity for controlling and changing his defensive responses.

The main difficulty of launching an attack - apart from the necessity of taking the opponent by surprise - is the necessity of getting close to the opponent who may retreat, attack or counter-attack.

According to various criteria of classification, we may differentiate several varieties of attack. Knowing and understanding the classification of attacks and, indeed, all other actions, is very important in the classification of tactics, both in the process of training and in competitions. As I keep saying to my students, "To look is not the same as to see, and to see is not the same as to perceive. We really perceive on a higher, conceptual-functional level - only what we know well, understand well, can explain and give a name to." As Confucius said many hundreds of years ago, the ability to giving a proper name to things is the first step toward wisdom.

The various classifications of attacks are presented in **Table 2**.

**Table 2**

**The Various Classifications of Attacks**

*Using various criteria of classification, attacks may be divided into:*

1	False Attacks	Real Attacks
2	Simple Attacks	Compound Attacks
3	First Intention Attacks	Second Intention Attacks
4	Attacks with known final	Attacks with unknown final
5	Attacks without change of primary intention during execution	Attacks with change of primary intention during their execution

These classifications of attacks are fairly self-explanatory. A short description below, however, will serve to clarify the details.

False attacks are attacks with no intention of scoring a hit, but serve some other purpose such as reconnoitring or drawing the opponent's action. For example, Fencer A, by means of a false attack, draws a parry-riposte from Fencer B and then scores a hit with counter-riposte (the entire action is typical second intention). In another example, Fencer A, starting with false attack, draws a stop-hit from Fencer B and subsequently executes a counter-time action which scores a point (also a second intention action).

Fencers with a phlegmatic temperament - with slow reaction and slow mobility of nervous processes - make up to a certain degree their lack of speed by using second intention actions. In other words, using false attack to draw an expected movement from the opponent and score a hit with a previously programmed action which might be counter-riposte, counter-time, remise or redouble. Using second intention actions, the attacker may react earlier and execute the foreseen final movement with more certainty and accuracy.

False attacks serve also the purpose of reconnoitring the opponent's attitudes, behaviour and reactions or to prepare a convenient distance and situation to launch a real attack.

Real attacks are attacks with the intention of scoring a point either directly or indirectly. A simple attack is an attack executed with one movement of the weapon arm (one "tempo"). A compound attack is executed with one or more feints or actions on the opponent's blade or feints following actions on the blade.

An attack which is intended to score without drawing and taking advantage of an opponent's riposte or counter attack is called a first intention attack. This class of attack may be simple or compound and may or may not include actions on the opponent's blade (i.e. beat, binding or press).

A second intention attack consists of a false attack which draws the opponent's parry-riposte, counter-attack or parry and delayed riposte and finishes with a foreseen counter-action by the original attacker. It may finish by parry counter-riposte, counter-time, remise or redouble.

Parrying or counter-attacking the opponent's counter-attack is called counter-time. Counter-time, like many other fencing actions, may be applied "on the spur of the moment" as an "automatic" motor response (motor reaction) or may be executed as a premeditated (foreseen) action constituting one of the many varieties of second intention attacks. Attacks with a known final, regardless of their simplicity or complexity are attacks which are conceived and executed according to the attacker's original program. On the other hand, attacks with an unknown final ("open-eyes") are executed with the first movement being foreseen (premeditated, pre-programmed) and the final movement depending on the opponent's response.

Attacks without change of intention are actions which are executed from the beginning to end, strictly according to the attacker's original program, even when the attacker incorrectly anticipated the opponent's response.

As I have mentioned before, attacks with a change of the original intention may seem to be, to the superficial observer, an "open-eyes" attack. However, this type of attack greatly differs from the open-eyes attack. In open-eyes attack, the fencer knows how the attack begins and finishes according to what his opponent does. In attacks with change of decision in execution, the fencer originally has a foreseen plan for the entire action and wants to execute it according to a preconceived motor program. He changes his action, however, when he sees his opponent reacts not in the way he predicted. Attacks with a change of intention during their execution are originally conceived as foreseen - first or second intention - and are modified during their execution under the influence of the opponent's unanticipated movement.

For example, Sabreur A intends to score a hit with first intention direct attack to the head (cut to head), taking advantage of speed and good timing. While actually executing the preconceived attack, Sabreur A notices that Sabreur B is taking a very fast quinte parry. The attacker changes in mid-attack his intention and finishes his attack with a cut to flank, deceiving his opponent's parry. Another example: an epeeist wants to execute first intention compound attack by feinting in the low line, drawing the opponent's octave parry and finishing with a disengagement hit to the top of the forearm. Contrary to his expectations, however, the opponent does not parry, but executes a stop-hit over the arm. The attacking epeeist quickly changes his/her intention and scores a hit by one of a variety of counter-time: executing a direct thrust with opposition in sixth line. And another example: Fencer A wants to apply a preconceived (foreseen) second intention attack, applying counter-time. By making a feint, this fencer wants to draw Fencer B's stop-hit, parry and score with a riposte. Contrary to his/her expectations, the opponent does not react to the feint. Noticing the lack of the expected reaction, Fencer A changes his/her intention and finishes with a real direct thrust.

The meticulous preparation of an attack, particularly when fencing an experienced opponent, is

impossible without the essential concentration of thought and attention necessary for fast and correct perception and fast and correct motor response. A fencer with a strong offensive drive who is~ preparing and concentrated on his attack, may suddenly be attacked by his opponent. Such an unexpected attack forces the attacked fencer to rapidly switch his/her thoughts and attention to avoid being hit. In order not to lose an active and offensive style of fencing, in which the fencer maintains control of the initiative and often uses offensive actions, the technique of defence - parries and counterattacks - must be perfectly mastered so that the fencer can be certain that they will be effective at any moment in the bout. Only then can he prepare his attacks and attack with courage and efficacy. Although it may sound paradoxical, the technical and psychological basis of an offensive style of fencing is ... confidence in his/her own defence. Confidence in defence allows the competitor to manoeuvre freely on the strip, to push the opponent to the end line of the piste and to prepare attacks comparatively calmly and with assurance. Such a style of fencing, active and offensive yet confident in defence is characteristic of many great fencers. A fencer who has an excellent command of parries and counterattacks may allow himself/herself to come almost dangerously close to the opponent to launch an attack at the appropriate moment.

An offensive style of fencing, without the backing of sure parries leads to double hits, simultaneous attacks and primitive escapes when the fencer is taken by surprise.

## **COUNTER-ATTACKS AND COUNTER-TIME**

A counter attack is any defensive-offensive movement against an offensive action (mostly against attacks but also against ripostes, etc.). Counter-attacks may be simple or compound.

Simple counter attacks comprise:

1. Stop-hits.
2. Stop-hits with opposition (they used be called time-hits, coup de temps, colpa di tempo).
3. Stop hit with evasion.
4. Derobe (*dérobement*) - against attacks which are preceded by a taking of the blade.

Compound counter-attacks (*Italian, finta in tempo*) comprise:

1. Feint of a stop hit - deceive the parry or taking of the blade.
2. Feint of derobe - derobe of the second action of the blade.

An action against a counter-attack is called counter-time. In French it is *contre temps* and in Italian it is *contra tempo*. In the old Italian rapier play, *tempo contra tempo* meant a counter-attack against a counterattack. For example, when the attacker begins with his rapier a cut to head and the attacked fencer started to execute cut to flank as a stop-hit, then the original attacker finished with a thrust with opposition thus executing *tempo contra tempo* (in the old Italian rapier school, "tempo" meant counter-attack and taking the opponent by surprise). In the French school, however, counter-time is mainly a tactical concept and the essence of it is deliberately drawing the opponent's attack or counterattack (second intention) in order to parry and score a hit with the riposte. So, the salient feature of the French conception of counter-time is, as I mentioned above, purely tactical: drawing the opponent's action - any action - and to score with parry-riposte. Roger Crosnier, a very prominent French master, describes counter-time as: *An action of drawing the opponent's stop-hit or time-hit, parrying it and riposting from it*. The F.I.E. rules state that counter-time is: *Every action made by the attacker against a stop-hit made by his opponent*. To me, as stated before, counter-time is every action against counter-attack, irrespective of intentions of fencer executing the action (whether foreseen or unforeseen).

Counter-time may be executed as a parry followed by riposte, a stop-hit, a stop-hit with opposition, or a beat-thrust. Counter-time against a compound counter-attack may be applied by successive parries or successively taking the blade.

Counter-time may also be applied while riposting - this is especially prevalent in epee. For example, an epee fencer defends with parry six and then begins a riposte to the leg. The opponent attempts to remise on the epeeist's arm (counter-attack against riposte) and the attacker deflects the remise with a stop-hit in opposition in sixth line (counter-time).

Tactically speaking, counter-time, like many other actions, may be applied as:

1. a foreseen action,
2. an action with change of intention during its execution,
3. one of the possible ways of finishing an attack with unknown destination.

Below are some examples.

#### **Foreseen Counter-Time** (second intention action)

An epee fencer deliberately draws a stop-hit the parries it and scores with a riposte or, by a rather slow taking of the opponent's blade, draws a derobe and scores with a hit by taking the blade for the second time and then thrusting in opposition.

A sabreur starts an attack with a deliberately bent arm, thus drawing a stop-hit and then confidently parries it and ripostes.

Another example: a sabreur feints a cut to flank with a step forwards, drawing an expected compound counter-attack from opponent by feint to head, cut to flank. On the first movement of the opponent, the attacker either swiftly finishes his attack or, after the fifth parry, parries seconde and scores with a riposte.

#### **Unforeseen Counter-Time** (change of intention during the execution of an action)

An epeeist starts to execute a foreseen attack with a feint in the low line, tries to draw the opponent's octave parry and wants to deceive the parry and score a hit in the high line. His opponent, however, does not attempt to take the expected parry but, instead, executes a stop-hit to the forearm. The attacker changes his original intention and finishes the attack with a hit with opposition in sixth line.

A foilist intends to apply a foreseen attack by quarte binding, direct thrust. The attacked fencer, contrary to the attacker's expectations, takes fourth parry. The attacker changes his intention and finishes the attack by disengagement, thrust.

Sabreur A executes a foreseen attack with a feint to head, cut to flank. Suddenly, he notices that Sabreur B is executing a stop-cut, instead of the expected quinte parry. Sabreur A changes his intention and makes a beat four, cut to head.

#### **Counter-Time as One of Possible Endings of Attack with Unknown Destination**

An epeeist begins his attack with an unknown ending ("open-eyes"). He starts with a feint and a step forward and finishes according to what his opponent will do. If the opponent does not respond, the attacker finishes with a direct thrust. If the opponent tries to parry, the attacker will

deceive the parry, scoring with a disengagement or counter-disengagement hit. If the opponent chooses to counter-attack, the attacker will parry-riposte or do any other action in counter-time.

Counter-time is usually used by an attacker but it may be used, also, in any other offensive actions. For example, a fencer may execute riposte by counter-time or even counter-time by counter-time. Examples:

- a. An epeeist parries opponent's attack by octave parry. The attacker immediately follows his attack by a redouble in the high line (stop-hit against a riposte). The defender parries the redouble with a sixth parry and scores the hit with opposition (riposte by counter-time).
- b. Epeeist A begins his attack and parries opponent's stop-hit. Epeeist B executes an immediate remise of his stop-hit which is parried again by the original attacker (counter-time in counter-time). Another example. Sabreur A begins his attack with feint to head. Sabreur B executes a stop-cut to head, which is parried with quinte parry by Sabreur A (counter-time). Sabreur B immediately applies remise to forearm of his stop-cut, which is parried again by the original attacker (counter-time by counter time).

## **DEFENCE**

Let us now briefly consider the defensive aspects of fencing.

Defence is the countering of an opponent's offensive actions with the purpose of avoiding being hit. Very often and preferably, defence, at the same time, allows us to take advantage of the opponent's nearness and his failure to score a hit - in order to score with a riposte or counter-attack. Defensive and counter-offensive actions are a reply to the opponent's offensive actions. Consequently, the defender usually does not have the initiative and is frequently caught unprepared. Most often, with exception of the cases when the defender deliberately draws the attack, the situation, the timing and type of attack are chosen by the attacker.

On the other hand, the diversity of defence (a multitude of defensive actions - different parries and combinations of parries as well as many varieties of counter-attack) which the attacking fencer may meet often paralyses or lowers his/her courage and self-assurance and hinders his/her choice, speed and accuracy of attack.

The actions of defence are mostly unforeseen - we do not know when or how our opponent will attack. When an unexpected attack occurs, fencers generally react with a retreat, parry, evasion (defensive actions) or counter-attack (offensive-defensive action) applied as a learned and highly automated motor response (motor reaction). Sometimes, however, and not very often, the actions of defence (both defensive actions and offensive-defensive actions) are applied as foreseen actions when an attack is expected or even drawn out of the opponent. Among the foreseen actions of defence, we may distinguish:

1. Actions of defence, foreseen in general.
2. Actions of defence, foreseen in detail.

Actions of defence, foreseen in general, occur when a fencer expects, or deliberately draws the opponent's attack without, however, knowing what kind of attack it will be. The appropriate form of defence - parry or counter-attack - is chosen on the basis of signals received by visual and tactile stimuli while the opponent's attack is in progress. Actions of defence, foreseen in detail, occur when the fencer expects or deliberately draws a particular attack (foreseen variety) from the opponent. The defending fencer, then has an already "prepared" parry or counter-attack (the appropriate motor program taken from the long memory store) taking into account the type of attack expected from the opponent. To make it clear, here are a few examples of defence,

foreseen in detail:

- a. An epeeist rushes forward, exposes his forearm. This, most likely, will provoke a direct attack to the forearm and the defender can execute a sixth circular parry and score with a riposte with opposition.
- b. A sabreur, on his opponent's offensive, exploratory movements, escapes rather wildly, pretending he is scared and showing the opponent wild parries. This provokes the attacker to make a very energetic compound attack with many feints which leads him/her to expose the forearm. The defending fencer, expecting this kind of attack, scores at the very beginning of the opponent's attack, a premeditated stop-hit to the forearm.
- c. A foilist makes an apparent faulty preparation by executing untamed counter-sixth presses on the opponent's blade. This preparation is designed to draw the opponent's attack with a counter-disengagement, thrust, taking advantage of the "fault and clumsy" preparation. The foilist, who is expecting this attack, executes a parry four and scores a riposte.

Incidentally, the above are also good examples of a simple reaction (simple sensory motor response) applied in a bout, i.e., a fencer expects, or even provokes, a given movement and responds with an already known, premeditated, prepared stroke (known stimulus - known response); the motor program of the action is prepared before the actual stimulus arrives in the pre-program part (preparatory part) of the motor reaction.

It is worth noting that unforeseen actions of defence and generally foreseen actions of defence are examples of choice reaction (choice sensory motor response). A choice reaction is when a fencer chooses the appropriate response to the stimulus (he chooses it only after the appearance of the stimulus - opponent's movement - in the latent period of motor reaction). In other words, whenever there is an action (attack) from the opponent, the defending fencer must recognise the stimulus variety of action - and make the correct choice of response.

The use of foreseen actions of defence give a fencer several advantages:

1. It ensures a state of high concentration, perception and preparedness.
2. It shortens the reaction time - the defensive movement may be started sufficiently early.
3. It facilitates the correct technical - and fast execution - of the defensive (parry, retreat, evasion) or counter offensive (counterattack) action - there is no deterioration of technique, which very often occurs when a fencer is taken by surprise.
4. It provides more of an opportunity and time to change a defensive response should the opponent change his/her offensive movement.
5. The defender may prepare the motor program of the action (parry or counter-attack) even before the appearance of the stimulus (the opponent's attack).

Unforeseen actions of defence are carried out "on the spur of the moment" or "instinctively" almost without the fencer realising it. He often realises what he did only at the end or after the action or if, and when, he committed an error in choosing, timing or executing a movement. The attention of the fencer is focused, not on how to execute a defensive stroke but, rather, on choosing the right response appropriately chosen stroke. Unforeseen actions of defence are, as we have mentioned, choice or differential reactions to a surprise movement by the opponent. This type of defence (unforeseen) depends, to a high degree on the quality of acquired sensory-motor skills (fencing strokes) and specific motor reactions. Well-learned and highly automated actions of defence - particularly parries - are very important for the fencer's efficacy of actions because his/her conscious mind may be free from fear of the opponent's unexpected attack and able to create the best conditions (psychological state, optimistic mood, self control, feeling of confidence) for active, bold, creative and effective conducting of the bout as well as the confidence in preparing his/her own attack. It is worthwhile to stress, once again, that the best

psychological and technical basis of an active, courageous, mobile and offensive style of fencing is confidence in one's unforeseen actions of defence, especially strong parries. The best defence is a parry followed by an instantaneous and fast riposte or a counterattack combined with a complete avoidance of the hit. The other forms of defence - retreat or evasion - although allowing us to avoid being hit, are less worthy because we are not hitting the opponent.

Some fencers prefer to base their style of fencing and tactics on foreseen, premeditated actions in which careful observation, accurate and fast perception, rational thinking, planning and often simple reaction play an important part. Others prefer to rely on their own improvisation, on what may be called "feeling of surprise"; these types of fencers rely on compound and other varieties of sensory motor reaction on intuitive and operative thinking, great mobility of the nervous processes, a high level of specific technical-tactical abilities and very high motor coordination. They rely on choice reaction, deferential reaction, intuitive reaction, anticipation of moving object reaction, and changing of intention while executing a foreseen action. Many great fencers rely on both foreseen and unforeseen actions and on offensive, defensive and counter-offensive actions.

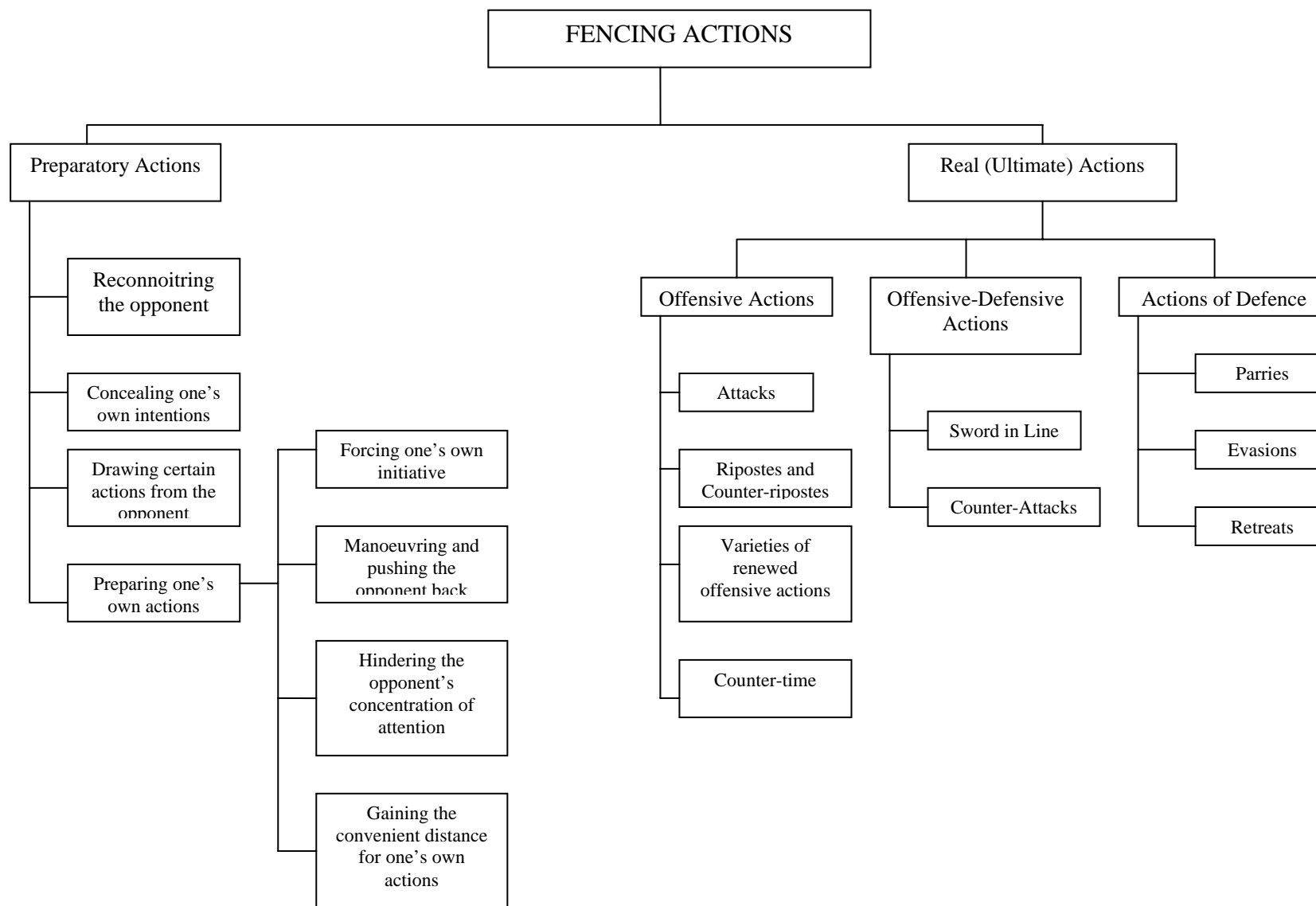
At the end of this article on fencing terminology, fencing actions and their application in fighting, allow me to remind you once more that knowledge of proper terminology, understanding the importance of sensory-motor skills, special technical-tactical and tactical abilities combined with many aspects of attention enhance the fencer's ability to quickly and correctly perceive tactical situations and solutions in a bout and to understand the course of training. In other words, repeating what Confucius said, being able to assign the proper names to things is the first step toward wisdom.

The importance of speech, verbal communication, and exact up-to-date terminology is, unfortunately, very often neglected by many coaches and fencers which leads to low efficacy of the training process and poor tactics in competition. If you are not convinced by this article and Professor David Tischler's words (see above), consider what the already mentioned great Chinese sage and philosopher, Confucius (551-479 BC) said, *If names are not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accord with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success. Therefore, a superior man considers it necessary that the names he uses may be spoken appropriately. What the superior man requires is that in his words there is nothing incorrect.* I sincerely hope that every fencer and coach will take these words to heart and be a superior man or woman.

(The basic classification of fencing actions and classification based on tactics are presented on **Tables 3 and 4.**

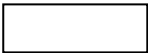

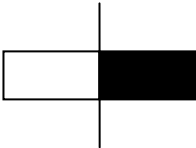

Table 3

### The Basic Classification of Fencing Actions



**Table 4**

**The Classification of Fencing Actions from the Point of View of their Practical Application in a Bout**

	Foreseen Actions		Unforeseen Actions	Partly Foreseen Actions	
	First Intention	Second Intention	Unknown	Open Eyes (with unknown final)	Change of Decision while Executing an Action
In Head (Primary Intention)			?		
In Reality (Actual Performance)	