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Exploring fitness landscapes

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working with this great scientist. But here I am. And I am happy that he turned out to be a great person too.

Abstract

Fitness landscape is a concept, which describes the dependence of phenotype on genotype. It was proposed almost a hundred years ago but only recent burst of technologies finally allowed exploring it. We studied different aspects of fitness landscape applying both: computational and experimental approaches. Using mammalian mitochondrial tRNAs we proved that evolution can proceed not only along the ridges of high fitness but also cross the low fitness valleys. Functional analysis of more than 56 000 mutants of green fluorescent protein from *Aequorea victoria* (avGFP) allowed us to describe local fitness landscape around a particular fitness peak. In addition to this we studied a case of population being on a slope – genetic code is undergoing changes in *Methanosarcina* making them stay in sub-optimum.

Keywords:

Fitness landscape, molecular evolution

Resumen

El paisaje adaptativo (fitness landscape) es un concepto que describe la dependencia del fenotipo en el genotipo. Hace más de cien años que este concepto fue propuesto, pero es sólo con la reciente expansión de tecnologías que finalmente ha podido ser explorado. Hemos estudiado diferentes aspectos del paisaje adaptativo aplicando tanto procedimientos computacionales como experimentales. Utilizando tRNAs mitocondriales de mamíferos hemos comprobado que la evolución puede proceder no sólo a lo largo de las crestas de elevado fitness sino también a través de los valles con reducido fitness. Análisis funcional de más de 56000 mutantes de la proteína verde fluorescente de *Aequorea Victoria* (avGFP) nos permitió describir el paisaje adaptativo local alrededor de un punto máximo específico de fitness. Mas aún, hemos estudiado un caso de una población en una pendiente – el código genético está atravesando cambios en *Methanosarcina* quedándose en sub-óptimo.

Keywords :

Paisaje adaptativo, evolución molecular

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1. Introduction

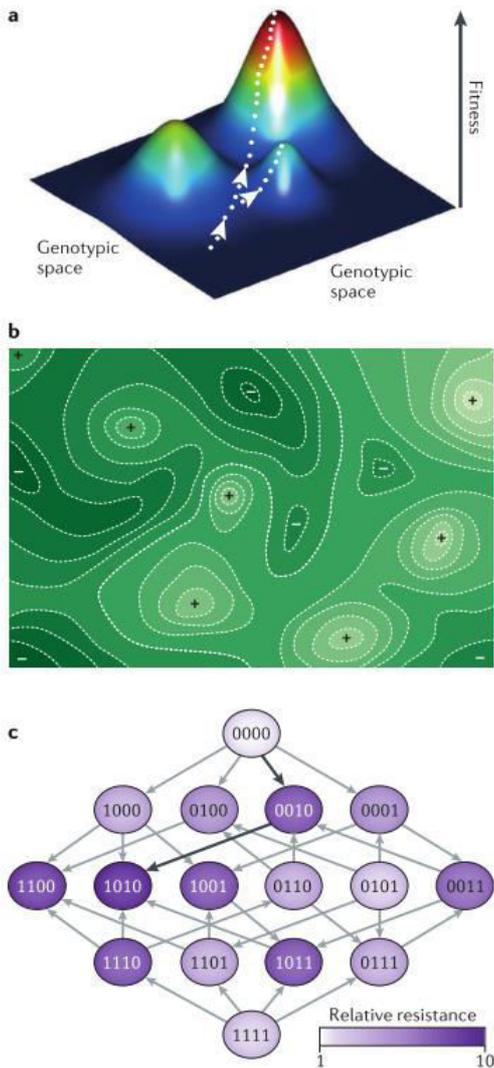


Figure 1: Representation of a fitness landscape. **A:** A fitness landscape can be visualized as a ‘mountainous’ landscape in three dimensions with genotypes arranged in the x–y plane and fitness on the z axis. The landscape shown is rugged with three fitness peaks separated by fitness ‘valleys’, and two imaginary evolutionary trajectories are shown by white dots and arrows. **B:** Wright’s two-dimensional “field of gene combinations” is shown. Fitness maximum and minimum are represented as “+” and “-”, respectively; dotted lines are contours of equal fitness. **C:** A fitness landscape for a case with four interacting loci. Nodes represent genotypes; 0 and 1 indicate wild-type and mutant amino acids, respectively. Arrows connect genotypes that differ by a single mutation and point towards genotypes with higher resistance. Bold black arrows indicate the ‘greedy’ walk (which substitutes the existing genotype with the largest-benefit mutation among the mutations available at each step) from wild-type (0000) to the global maximum (1010) [de Visser et al., 2014]

1.1. The concept of fitness landscape

The concept of fitness landscape was proposed by Sewall Wright in 1932 [Wright, 1932]. And since then it remains one of the fundamental concepts in evolutionary biology. The idea is both nice and simple. We can imagine genotype as a point in the space of all genotypes (Fig 1). Usually it is understood as a multidimensional space where every dimension represents some functional unit. And alleles are along the axis. Fitness brings another dimension to this system.

Fitness landscape is basically a map, which in theory can be used to predict the path of evolution. But it is still far not the case since we know too little about it.

First attempts to analyze real fitness landscapes came soon after sequencing. It became possible to compare different variants of sequences and even reconstruct ancestral sequences. Unfortunately it didn't provide much information since the history of navigation of these populations in their fitness landscape remained unknown. So, basically the only conclusion could have been made was that these particular sequences which corresponded to the wild type mostly show examples of fitness peaks.

Most of the studies analysed pairwise mutational interactions or the dependence of mean fitness on the number of mutations.

The way populations can navigate in fitness landscape remained one of the most important evolutionary questions for decades. Obviously evolution can proceed towards some peak of high fitness if there are no obstacles (Fig 2: a, c, d). In this case it can go along the way with constantly increasing fitness (Fig 2: a, d) or pass for some time a neutral region. The question was whether or not it can proceed through a valley of low fitness (Fig 2: b). Will the sub-optimal peak be a dead end for this population? We answer this question in the chapter I of this thesis.

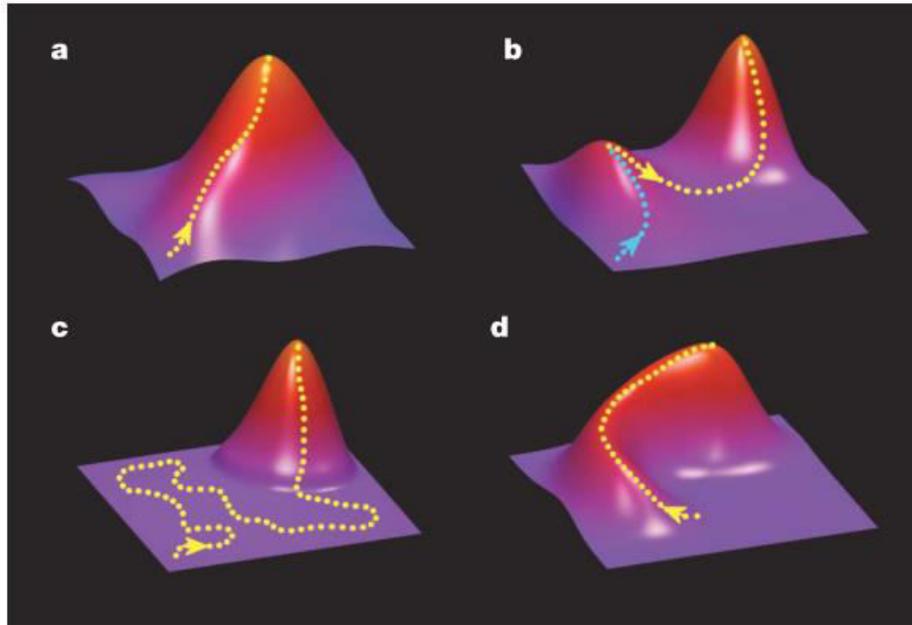


Figure 2. Schematic representations of fitness landscape features.

Fitness is shown as a function of sequence: the dotted lines are mutational paths to higher fitness. a, Single smooth peak. All direct paths to the top are increasing in fitness. b, Rugged landscape with multiple peaks. The yellow path has a fitness decrease that drastically lowers its evolutionary probability. Along the blue path selection leads in the wrong direction to an evolutionary trap. c, Neutral landscape. When neutral mutations are essential, evolutionary probabilities are low. d, Detour landscape. The occurrence of paths where mutations are reverted shows that sequence analysis may fail to show mutations that are essential to the evolutionary history.

[Poelwijk et al., 2007]

1.2. Attempts to investigate fitness landscape

In order to better understand the path evolution can and can not take it was necessary to perform systematic studies of fitness landscape. There are still just few systematic studies of empirical fitness landscapes. And there are different possible approaches.

The first approach infers qualitative features of the topography, such as its ruggedness, either from patterns of parallel evolution in microbial evolution experiments or from the prevalence of sign epistasis among sets of constructed mutation pairs. This approach allows analyzing large area of genotypic space. Unfortunately, the topographical information it reveals is incomplete and biased by the population dynamic regime used. Another approach involves the systematic analysis of all possible combinations of a

small set of mutations. This approach explores a tiny part of genotypic space around one point, but the information obtained is quite complete and allows to quantify and compare mutational and evolutionary trajectories.

These studies can be also classified based on the source of mutations. They can co-occur in extant genotypes or isolated from laboratory evolution experiments. Most of the studies don't estimate real fitness but rather use some proxy of it including growth rate or level of antibiotic resistance.

What information can we get about the topography of real fitness landscapes from these studies? There are two general observations can be made. First, the data sets show a variable, but on average substantial, level of ruggedness. All fitness landscapes are more rugged than expected in the absence of epistasis but less so than expected if mutations had random effects across genetic backgrounds. Second, several data sets show on average diminishing returns epistasis among beneficial mutations, in which benefits are smaller in high fitness backgrounds than in low fitness backgrounds.

Unfortunately no data from previous studies existed for deleterious mutations that are known for their collective negative effect or occurrence in a single gene.

Even though there is still not much data on fitness landscapes some trends can be observed. Mutations with known collective benefit show less ruggedness than mutations for which the combined effect is unknown [Jacquier et al., 2012]. Another remarkable pattern is following: mutations of large effect show greater ruggedness than small effect mutations. The third trend is that intragenic landscapes have greater ruggedness than intergenic landscapes.

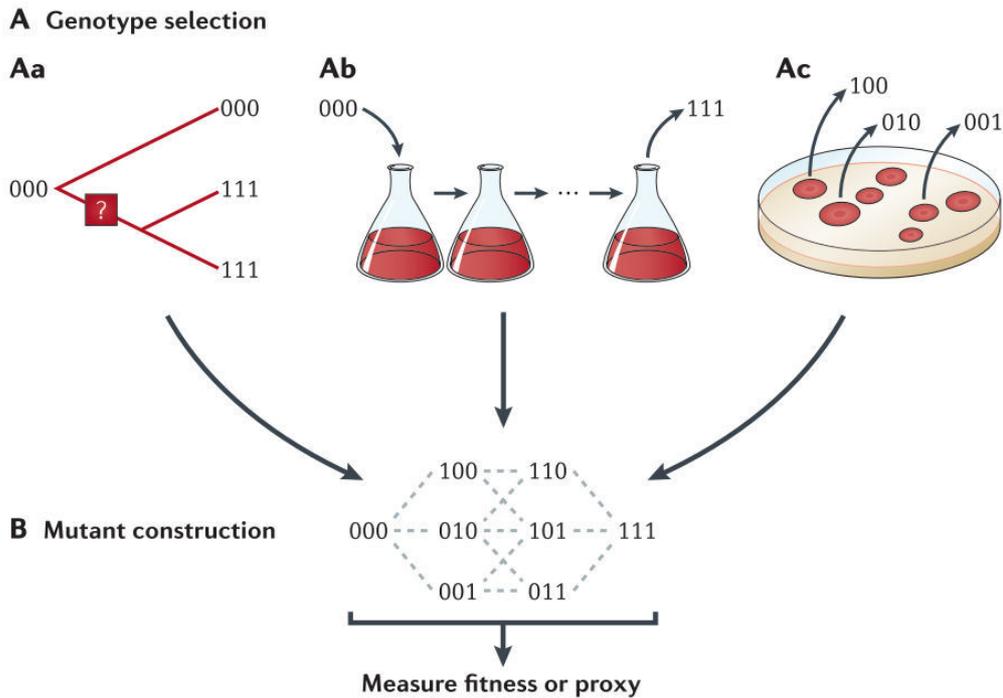


Figure 3. Approaches for the empirical study of fitness landscapes. Experimental approaches for studying small-scale fitness landscapes share three essential components: a set of mutations of interest is identified (part A); mutants are constructed to carry all 2^L possible combinations of the L selected mutations (in this case, $L = 3$, and 0 and 1 indicate the absence and presence of the mutation, respectively) (part B); and the fitness or a fitness proxy (for example, antibiotic resistance) is measured for all genotypes. Mutations of interest can come from three different sources: from phylogenetic analyses that infer the ancestor of extant genotypes (part Aa); from microbial evolution experiments in which mutations co-occur in an evolving lineage (part Ab); or from sets of mutants that each carry a single mutation (part Ac), such as alternative mutations that cause antibiotic resistance. The a posteriori approaches (parts Aa, Ab) are less likely to find much sign epistasis because these mutations have collectively ‘survived’ the selective pressure, whereas the a priori approach (part Ac) does not suffer from this bias. [de Visser et al., 2014]

1.3. Experimental approaches

There are two significantly different approaches to experimentally investigate the fitness landscape. It can be either a selection [Palmer et al., 2015] followed by sequencing (Fig 3) or creating a library of mutants and then performing their analysis. The second approach provided opportunity to perform first extensive study of a region of a protein (Fig 4). The method EMPIRIC has been then used to perform analysis of all

single mutants of ubiquitin in the same laboratory and also adopted by other laboratories [Roscoe et al., 2013; Hietpas et al., 2011].

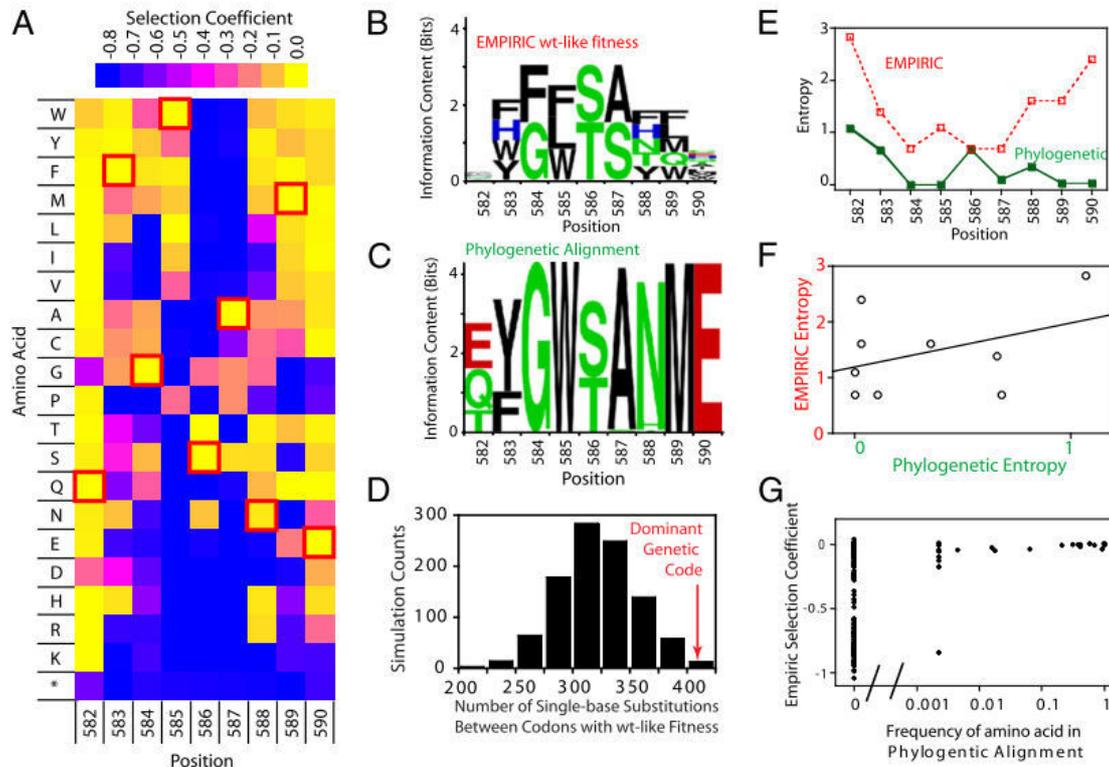


Figure 4. Amino acid profile in phylogenetic alignment poorly predicts EMPIRIC fitness profile. (A) Heat map representation of the EMPIRIC fitness profile with the wild-type amino acids outlined in red. Information content logos generated from amino acids with WT-like EMPIRIC fitness (B) and a phylogenetic alignment of 448 Hsp90 protein sequences (C). (D) The dominant genetic code is optimized for single-base substitutions between codons with WT-like fitness compared with randomly simulated codes ($+2.4\sigma$). (E) Distribution of tolerated and phylogenetically observed amino acids expressed as an entropy where zero corresponds to a frozen position and 3 corresponds to unrestrained positions. (F) Relationship between tolerated amino acid profile from EMPIRIC fitness measurements and phylogenetic alignment. Linear regression indicates a very weak correlation with R^2 of 0.15. (G) EMPIRIC fitness analyzed as a function of amino acid prevalence in the phylogenetic alignment. Most amino acids observed in the phylogenetic alignment are well-tolerated when made in the yeast homolog. [Hietpas et al., 2011]

1.4. Epistasis

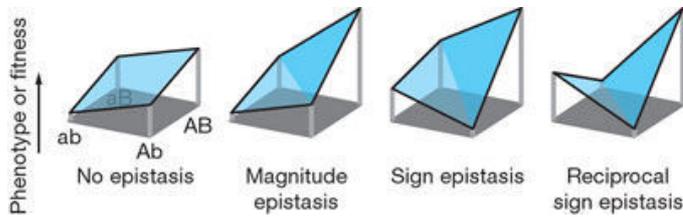


Figure 5
Some variants of epistasis
[Poelwijk et al., 2007]

Nowadays the term epistasis has a plurality of meanings, but was first used by Bateson to describe the masking of the effects of one genetic variant by another [Bateson, 1909]. Later, the term ‘epistacy’ was used by R.A. Fisher to refer to any statistical deviation from the additive combination of two loci. But then it was replaced with the word epistasis.

This term and the concept behind it play one of the most important roles in evolution. Even though it should be implemented to fitness, usually some measurement of phenotype is considered as a suitable proxy. Than this expected phenotype, such as, for example, growth rate, is compared for a set of mutants.

The simplest case of epistatic interaction between loci can be observed between two diallelic loci (Fig 5). Biological molecules don’t provide this type directly. But the closest type of interaction between loci is between corresponding pairs in RNA structures.

The term “genetic interactions” is also often used as a replacement for epistasis if spoken of a situation when different genes are involved.

There are many ways alleles can interact. Thus, epistasis is a very general term covering a lot of possible situations.

Epistatic interactions can be both alleviating (suppressive) or aggravating (increasing).

Interestingly the sign of epistasis can change based on the original effects of the changes making this topic tricky. Interactions can also occur between sequence variants in the same gene (‘intramolecular epistasis’) or between variants in different genes

(‘intermolecular epistasis’). Even the presence of gene can be an epistatic issue (Fig 6), as it has been shown for yeast strains by Dowell [Dowell et al., 2010].

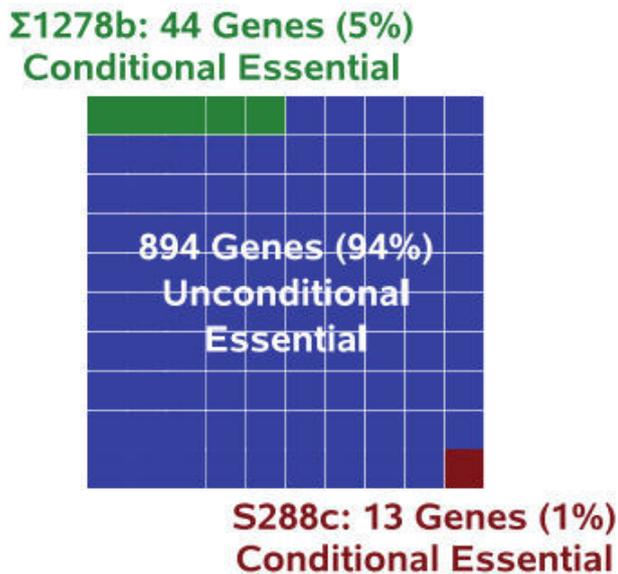


Figure 6.

An example of complex intragenic epistasis:

Most essential genes from the strain S288c of *S. cerevisiae* are also essential in S1278b (94%); however, ~5% are essential only in the S1278b genetic background, whereas ~1% are essential only in S288c.

[Dowell et al., 2010]

The molecular mechanism underlying epistasis is mostly unresolved question. How does it happen that the same mutation turns out to be better in one context but not in another? Is it possible to predict which mutations will show epistatic interactions and how?

Some progress has been made here. Stem structures of RNAs can be an example.

Additional clue can be obtained from evolutionary correlated changes.

Individuals of a species typically differ in the sequences of thousands of different proteins, not to mention variation in non-coding regions of the genome. As a result, the consequence of a particular mutation has the potential to be modified by variation in the activities of thousands of different proteins.

One of the evidences for the pervasive nature of epistasis derives from large-scale reverse genetic screens. In this approach pairs of mutations are systematically

combined, and the effects on viability or growth are then determined. The negative and positive interactions between millions of different loss- of-function mutations in yeast have been quantified using this approach. It has been shown that the effects of the mutation can be influenced by perturbing the activity of many additional genes.

Although most genes make few strong negative epistatic interactions, a subset of genes interact with many different loci, and with loci that have many different functions. These genes are called genetic hubs, buffers or capacitors, and are strikingly biased in their molecular functions. They can be chaperones or be members of the chromatin regulation network.

Certainly these genes have the potential to influence the activity of many different proteins, for example in the case of chaperones by assisting protein folding. As an overall trend, there is also a strong correlation between the fitness of a single mutant and the number of epistatic interactions detected for that mutation. The same genes that act as genetic hubs are also important for buffering environmental change and stochastic variation. This way their function of being hubs is a by-product of this function.

2. Overview of the thesis

Appearance of the concept of fitness landscape brought questions on how evolving populations navigate there. The easiest case is when there is no decrease in fitness along the way. It can be either on a flat region under neutral selection or climbing up under positive. But what happens if there is a valley of low fitness on the way to another peak? The question on whether or not evolution can proceed through such a valley remained one of the long-standing questions in evolution. To answer it we decided to study the simplest case – when there are just two loci. An example of this can be observed in stems of RNAs. Corresponding nucleotides can form a Watson-Crick (WC) pair (G-C or A-U) or decrease stability of the stem structure. So we decided to study evolution in these pairs focusing on stems of mitochondrial tRNAs of mammals. This allowed us to show that evolution can proceed through the valleys of low fitness indeed. The comparison of data on evolution and polymorphisms allowed us to estimate the depth of these valleys. This work is presented in the chapter XX of this thesis.

In the next project we decided to focus on the fitness landscape of a particular molecule, since it can be directly linked the fitness of the organism if the functionality of this molecule is essential.

Even though we have a lot of data on sequence variants now usually they correspond to distant functional sequences. Thus we can observe not just a small fraction of a fitness landscape of a molecule, but a set of distant points without having data on what is between them. This way we loose a lot of important information including the general ruggedness of the fitness landscape, the angle of the slope of a particular fitness peak, amount of epistasis. Recently there were several attempts to perform a robust study of fitness landscapes. Some of them investigated a very small space analyzing only single mutants. Another ones focused on just a region of a gene or on a set of functionally or evolutionary important sites. In our project we performed functional analysis of more

than 56 000 mutants of green fluorescent protein from *Aequorea victoria* (avGFP) including variants up to ten changes from the original wild type sequence. This approach allowed us to explore relatively big space in the fitness landscape of avGFP. This project is presented in the chapter XX.

The clade of *Methanosarcina* provides us with an interesting case of genetic code undergoing changes. In this case TAG/UAG has ambiguous function – it is for both termination of translation and as a coding codon for amino acid pyrrolysine. There is no evidence for existence of the regulatory mechanism. Thus appearance of TAG codon in a particular coding sequence brings the fitness of it down but not completely. During every round of translation UAG can be recognized as a stop-codon or as a coding codon. Thus some fraction of proteins synthesized from this mRNA will be too short/long but some will have appropriate length. The study of evolution of this codon is presented in the chapter XX.

Chapters I and II in the Appendix present papers resulted from collaborations. In the first one we present a case of mistaken identification of bird species *Acrocephalus orinus*. I participated in the experimental procedures. In the second one we study the origin and evolution of a new biochemical function - Methacrylate Redox System.

3. Compensatory evolution in mitochondrial tRNAs navigates valleys of low fitness

Compensatory evolution in mitochondrial tRNAs navigates valleys of low fitness.

Meer MV, Kondrashov AS, Artzy-Randrup Y, Kondrashov FA.

Nature. 2010 Mar 11;464(7286):279-82. doi: 10.1038/nature08691. Epub 2010 Feb 24.

PMID: 20182427

Meer MV, Kondrashov AS, Artzy-Randrup Y, Kondrashov FA. [Compensatory evolution in mitochondrial tRNAs navigates valleys of low fitness](#). Nature. 2010 Mar 11;464(7286):279-82. doi: 10.1038/nature08691

4. Local fitness landscape of the green fluorescent protein

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5. Evolution of TAG codon in Methanosarcina

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Abstract

TAG/UAG codon is ambifunctional in the clade of *Methanosarcina* being used as both: translation terminator and a coding codon. No system of *in vivo* distinguishing between these two functions has been reported. Thus, current state of TAG codon provides us with an example of genetic code being changed. We have performed a study of evolution of this codon showing that this is a case of mutational-selection balance with TAG codons being strongly disfavored.

Keywords:

Pyrrolysine, genetic code evolution

Introduction

Pyrrolysine (Pyl, O) is the 22nd amino acid known to be included into proteins during translation [Hao et al., 2002]. It can be found mostly in methanogenic archaea of the genus *Methanosarcina*. Pyrrolysine is encoded by TAG codon [Ibba et al., 2002]. At the same time as it has been shown experimentally TAG still retains the stop codon function in this genus [Alkalaeva et al., 2009].

In contrast to the Selenocysteine (Sec) coding system, where the SECIS structure determines the Sec-coding function of a specific TGA codon, such system has not been found for Pyl-coding TAG codons [Namya et al., 2007]. There are also other differences between Pyl and Sec, including the way they are synthesized. Whereas Sec is a product of modification of the amino acid Serine, which is already attached to Sec-tRNA, Pyl has a pathway as the canonical 20 amino acids. First it is synthesized and only then loaded to the corresponding tRNA by Pyrrolysyl-tRNA synthetase [Krzycki, 2005].

Selenocysteine needs Selenocysteine-specific elongation factor to be incorporated into the polypeptide chain [Forchhammer, 1989]. Pyl doesn't need something like this [Namya et al., 2007]. Thus, in some sense Pyl behaves more similar to the canonical amino acids.

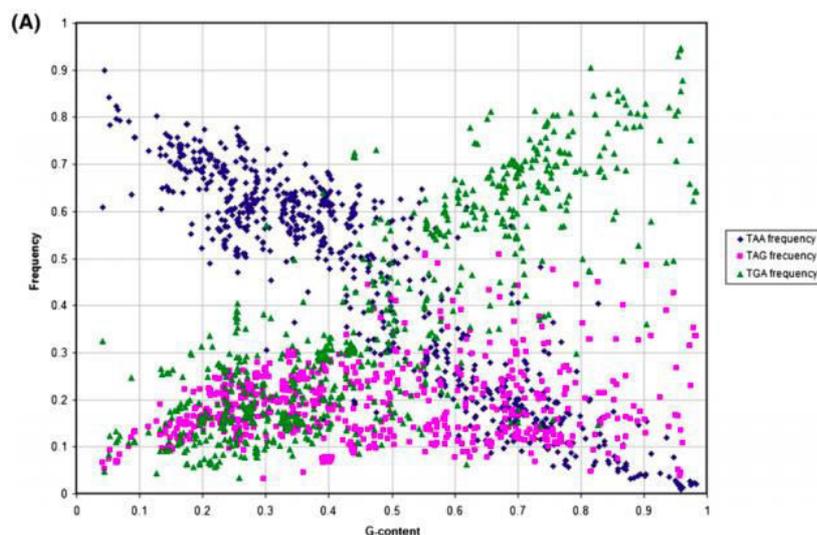


Figure 1. Dependence of stop codon usage on GC-content. TAA is shown in blue, TAG in magenta and TGA in green.

[Povolotskaya et al., 2012]

TAG/UAG codon in *Methanosarcina* is bi-functional with the Pyl-coding and stop codon functions being in a competitive inhibition-like state [Lobanov et al., 2010]. Thereby from a single mRNA at every read through, a TAG/UAG codon has a chance of being recognized by translation machinery as a stop codon or as a Pyl codon.

Most of prokaryotic genomes contain around 20% of genes terminated by TAG (Fig 1). But for *Methanosarcina* this amount is reduced to just a few percents [Zhang et al., 2005]. This perfectly fits with such an inefficient system, suggesting TAG codons to be deleterious.

Here we provide analysis of the evolution of TAG codons in this genus.

Results and discussion

The amount of TAG containing genes in Pyl-coding Archaea from the clade of *Methanosarcina* is much lower than in other prokaryotic species signifying that there has been a decrease of their fraction in the past. But now there are three possibilities. In the first one TAG codon is still highly deleterious as it should be for a dual functional and not regulated system. Another opportunity is that our knowledge of the Pyl incorporation is not good enough, and TAG became a pure Pyl codon. In this case the fraction of TAG should be increasing. And under the third scenario the amount of TAG should be stable: these variants arise due to natural mutagenesis but they are eliminated with the speed similar to the rate of emergence.

Most of these changes occur in the end of coding sequences – in a region known to be less conservative than the upstream region. This brings a complication to genomic comparisons since different species turn out to be too distant to trace small changes in the end of the sequence. A solution can be to use different strains. But in this case there can be too few changes.

To study the evolution of TAG codon we used 140 genomes of *Methanosarcina*

sp. from the Genbank and sequenced 14 more genomes. We divided them into three groups based on their similarity (Fig 2,3,4). *M.mazei* turned out to be species with the biggest amount of genomes available. We had 131 strains. But these strains were very similar to each other. Some of them are rather different samples of the same strain. We managed to obtain just 11 *M.barkeri* genomes. But they were on average more distant.

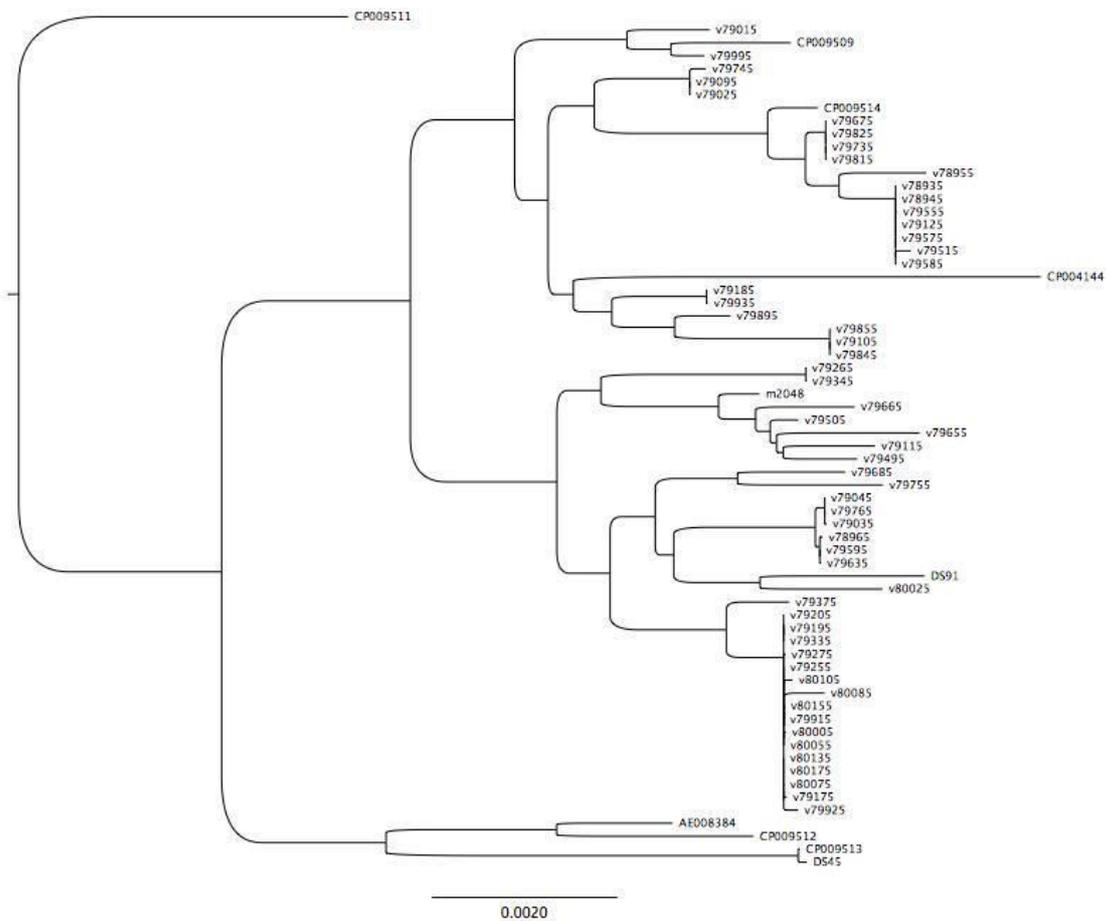


Figure 2: Phylogeny of *M.mazei* strains

Other 12 genomes were even more distant. This group included several strains of *M. thermophila*, *M. acetivorans* and some other strains including the ones of undefined species.

We have annotated de-novo sequenced genomes and re-annotated the ones existing in the GenBank. We considered TAG as a coding codon. This way none of coding sequence terminated with it.

The amount of genes with TAG codons turned out to vary a bit between the

three groups (Tab 1).

Table 1. Fraction of genes with following codons

	<i>M.mazei</i>	<i>M.barkeri</i>	<i>M.sp</i>
TAG	2,2	1,7	1,2
TAA	56,8	59,6	50,5
TGA	43,2	40,4	49,5

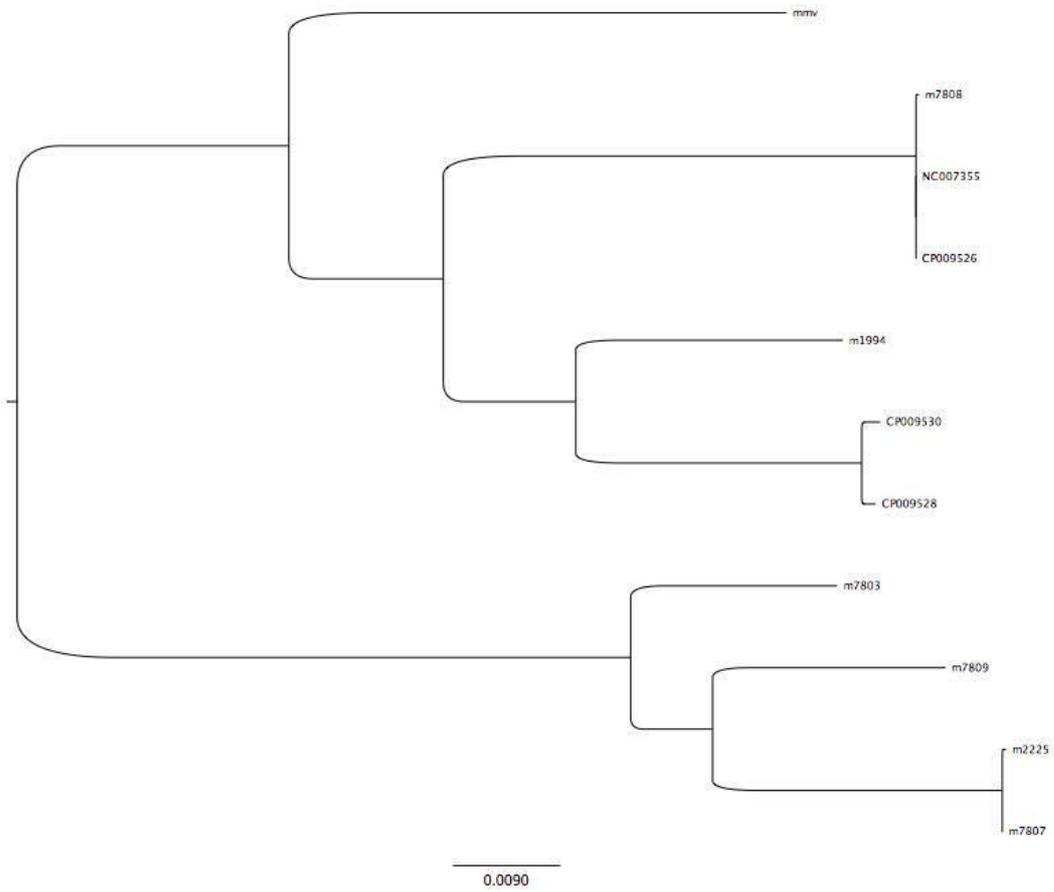


Figure 3: Phylogeny of *M.barkeri* strains

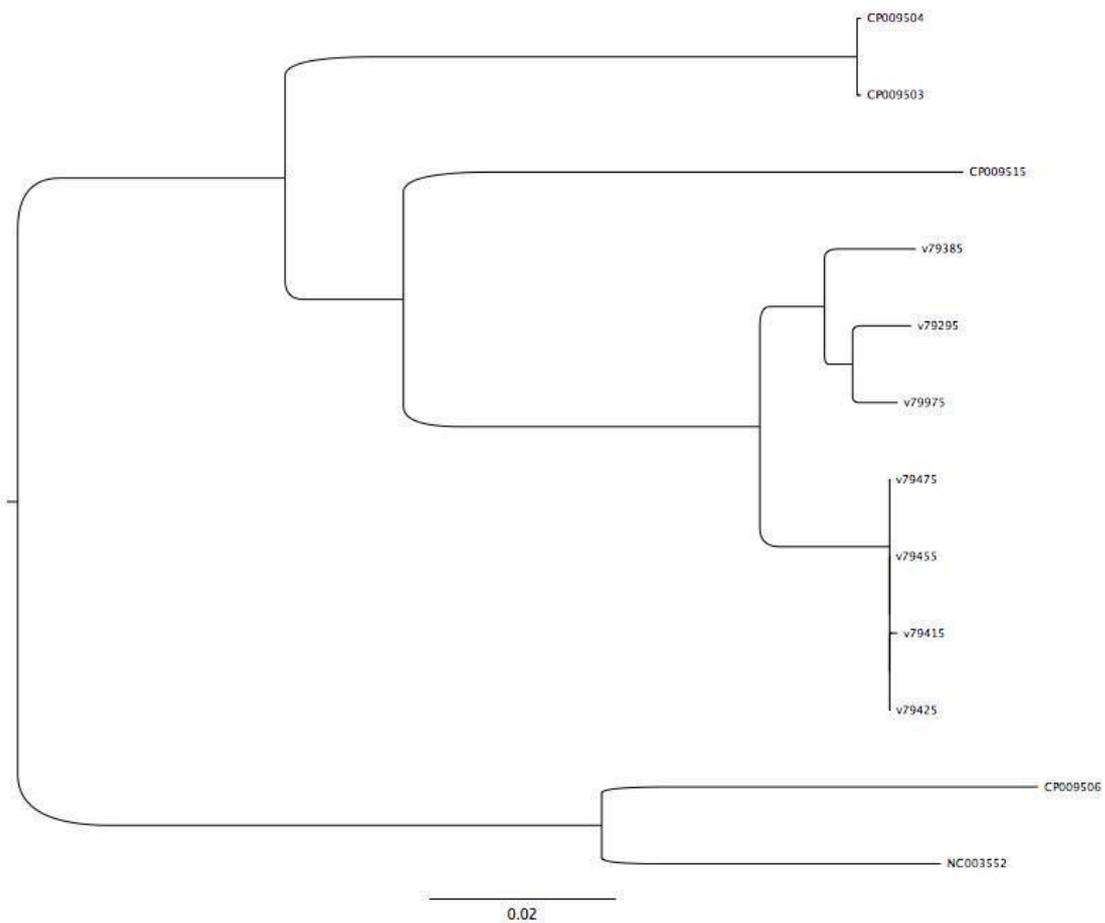


Figure 4: Phylogeny of *Methanosarcina* sp. strains

To check whether or not the amount of TAG codon is changing in these genomes, we performed a phylogenetic analysis. In *M.barkeri* 55 TAG were gained and 52 lost, meanwhile in other two groups the situation was different: *M. mazei* had 59 gains versus 28 losses. The situation in *M.sp* group was similar to *M.mazei*: in 62 gains and 28 losses. Does this mean that TAG stopped being disfavored?

To answer this question we decided to measure the rate of evolution. Since changes in TAG are caused often not just by point mutations, we considered also all types of changes for other codons. The rate of changes of TAA and TGA was similar to that for coding codons. Whereas the rate of evolution of TAG was increased 7.8, 6.7 and 5.3 times for *M.mazei*, *M.barkeri* and *M.sp*. correspondingly.

Thus we observe a situation when the amount of TAG codon increases even

though it is strongly deleterious.

Table 2. Rate of changes of different codons across the coding sequences of the genomes

Codon	<i>M.mazei</i>	<i>M.barkeri</i>	<i>M.sp</i>
AAA	0,10	2,34	2,64
AAC	0,15	4,73	4,09
AAG	0,15	4,16	4,35
AAT	0,17	3,86	3,89
ACA	0,15	3,43	4,52
ACC	0,16	5,41	5,15
ACG	0,25	6,11	6,36
ACT	0,18	3,95	5,05
AGA	0,16	3,71	4,66
AGC	0,13	4,77	4,58
AGG	0,14	4,84	4,77
AGT	0,18	3,92	4,49
ATA	0,12	2,90	3,76
ATC	0,15	4,84	4,67
ATG	0,06	1,21	1,38
ATT	0,14	3,07	3,79
CAA	0,24	3,28	3,82
CAC	0,16	4,52	3,97
CAG	0,07	2,39	2,34
CAT	0,16	3,34	3,85
CCA	0,25	4,40	5,56
CCC	0,20	5,68	5,24
CCG	0,21	6,19	5,78
CCT	0,14	3,00	4,35
CGA	0,25	5,04	5,86
CGC	0,14	4,86	4,50
CGG	0,21	6,58	6,35
CGT	0,21	4,04	4,50
CTA	0,42	6,94	7,95
CTC	0,15	4,72	4,51
CTG	0,12	4,54	4,29
CTT	0,10	2,32	3,15
GAA	0,11	2,40	2,71
GAC	0,16	4,91	4,61

GAG	0,15	4,62	4,67
GAT	0,17	3,63	4,04
GCA	0,11	2,94	3,70
GCC	0,17	5,43	5,28
GCG	0,27	7,44	7,06
GCT	0,14	3,75	4,65
GGA	0,14	3,09	4,08
GGC	0,17	5,49	5,64
GGG	0,17	5,62	5,27
GGT	0,21	4,80	5,62
GTA	0,17	3,75	4,65
GTC	0,17	5,39	5,53
GTG	0,17	4,61	4,61
GTT	0,15	3,58	4,27
TAA	0,16	2,61	2,55
TAC	0,13	3,58	3,43
TAG	1,25	27,15	22,94
TAT	0,12	2,36	2,70
TCA	0,14	3,02	4,13
TCC	0,14	4,68	4,30
TCG	0,20	5,40	5,54
TCT	0,15	3,38	4,44
TGA	0,14	2,77	2,78
TGC	0,11	3,52	3,47
TGG	0,02	0,26	0,34
TGT	0,16	2,91	3,38
TTA	0,14	3,34	3,52
TTC	0,11	3,19	2,99
TTG	0,24	4,63	4,72
TTT	0,09	1,93	2,32

Materials and methods

140 genomes of *Methanosarcina sp.* were downloaded from the GenBank

Cultures and DNA of 14 *Methanosarcina* strains were obtained from DSMZ (<https://www.dsmz.de/>).

These of the genomes were sequenced and assembled de novo. The genomes were sequenced using Illumina HiSeq technology. A combination of approaches and programs was used for the assembly.

SOAPdenovo [Luo et al.: SOAPdenovo2: an empirically improved memory-efficient short-read de novo assembler. *GigaScience* 2012 1:18.], velvet [Zerbino DR, Birney E. Velvet: algorithms for de novo short read assembly using de Bruijn graphs. *Genome Res.* 2008 May;18(5):821-9.] and SPAdes [Nurk S, Bankevich A, Antipov D, Gurevich AA, Korobeynikov A, Lapidus A, Prjibelski AD, Pyshkin A, Sirotkin A, Sirotkin Y, Stepanauskas R, Clingenpeel SR, Woyke T, McLean JS, Lasken R, Tesler G, Alekseyev MA, Pevzner PA. Assembling single-cell genomes and mini-metagenomes from chimeric MDA products. *J Comput Biol.* 2013 Oct;20(10):714-37.] were used as assemblers.

GapCloser was used to improve the assemblies.

Open reading frames were predicted using Glimmer [S. Salzberg, A. Delcher, S. Kasif, and O. White. Microbial gene identification using interpolated Markov models, *Nucleic Acids Research* 26:2 (1998), 544-548.] with only TAA and TGA being set as stop codons.

Genes were clustered to orthological groups based on the results of reciprocal best blast hit approach [Altschul, S.F., Gish, W., Miller, W., Myers, E.W. & Lipman, D.J. (1990) "Basic local alignment search tool." *J. Mol. Biol.* 215:403-410].

Sequences were aligned with Muscle [Edgar RC. MUSCLE: multiple sequence alignment with high accuracy and high throughput. *Nucleic Acids Res.* 2004 Mar 19;32(5):1792-7.]. TAA, TGA and TAG codons were pseudotranslated as amino acid X.

Phylogenetic trees were reconstructed using PhyML ["New Algorithms and Methods to Estimate Maximum-Likelihood Phylogenies: Assessing the Performance of PhyML 3.0." Guindon S., Dufayard J.F., Lefort V., Anisimova M., Hordijk W., Gascuel O. *Systematic Biology*, 59(3):307-21, 2010].

Ancestry reconstruction and trace of evolutionary changes were performed with modified PAML package [Yang Z. PAML 4: phylogenetic analysis by maximum likelihood. *Mol Biol Evol.*, 2007 Aug;24(8):1586-91. Epub 2007 May 4.]. TAA, TGA and TAG were set as coding codons and they were included into analysis.

All alignments with genes containing TAG were manually checked. All changes from/to TAG codon were also manually verified.

Data handling and analysis was done with scripts written in Perl.

6. Discussion

There are different aspects of fitness landscape, which can be issued. For decades it was possible to investigate it just theoretically. Luckily we live in the era when we can easily collect or even create a lot of data to perform extensive studies.

Proposing the concept of fitness landscape Sewall Wright greatly underestimated the number of loci [Wright, 1932]. “10 allelomorphs in 1000 loci” he mentions in his paper is an underestimation not even for an organism but for a single protein! There is a tendency to study fitness landscapes of particular proteins or RNAs. But one should always take into account the existence of intragenic epistasis. So, the fitness landscape obtained for an isolated or studied in an artificial system protein might differ from the native one. Taking a protein, which doesn't interact with many other biomolecules might be a solution. This is also one of the reasons why we took GFP.

We had opportunity to look at the epistasis for two types of molecules – a protein and a set of tRNAs. And it is not surprising that we observed more epistasis in the stem structures of tRNAs than studying the local fitness of GFP since stems are very special epistasis-prone structures. The molecular mechanism of epistasis in the stems of RNAs is well understood and it is based the stability of the structure. Much less in understood about the proteins and about loops of RNAs. A project similar to the one we did with GFP has recently been done on a tRNA, significantly increasing the amount of information about epistasis and evolution in RNAs [Chuan Li, unpublished]. Publications on extensive and systematic investigation of fitness landscapes come out so often these days that it makes me being optimistic about us being able to understand and start using it soon.

The ability to predict phenotype from the genotype is a philosopher's stone of modern geneticists. Checking effect of every single mutation is challenging. But even this turns

out to be not enough due to epistasis. But how worried we really should be about it? How much does it influence evolution? In this thesis we tried to provide some answers highlighting areas in fitness landscapes but there is still much to be done to really shed the light.

TAG codon in *Methanosarcina* is an example of how the change of genetic code can proceed. We see that genomes undergoing this switch decreased the frequency of this codon and it is still under strong negative selection. Leading to a fraction of proteins synthesized from a particular mRNA being inappropriate length it reduces the fitness of these proteins in a non-trivial manner. A mutation in a coding sequence influences the expression level.

7. Conclusions

1. More than a half of changes in stems of mammalian mitochondrion tRNAs are involved in compensatory changes with AT \leftrightarrow GC being the most common ones
2. The path of changes in a compensatory evolution of mammalian mt-tRNAs stem structures can be explained by Shifting-Balance model but not by Dobzhansky-Muller
3. Fitness peak of GFP is narrow with elimination of fluorescence after just five random mutations
4. Epistasis influenced 30% of variants of GFP mutants we have analysed
5. 10% of single mutations kill the function of GFP, but at least 10% of them are examples of CPDs
6. TAG codon is strongly disfavored in Methanosarcina however it is gained overall

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9. Appendix

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