**Tetranucleotide usage in mycobacteriophage genomes: alignment-free methods to cluster phage and infer evolutionary relationships**

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**Abstract**

**Background**

The genomic sequences of phages isolated on mycobacterial hosts are diverse, mosaic and often share little nucleotide similarity. However, about 30 unique types have been isolated, allowing most phage to be grouped into clusters and further into subclusters [1]. Many tools for the analysis of mycobacteriophage genomes depend on sequence alignment or knowledge of gene content. These methods are computationally expensive, can require significant manual input (for example, gene annotation) and can be ineffective for significantly diverged sequences [2]. We evaluated tetranucleotide usage in mycobacteriophages as an alternative to alignment-based methods for genome analysis.

**Description**

We computed tetranucleotide usage deviation, the ratio of observed counts of 4-mers in a genome to the expected count under a null model [3]. Tetranucleotide usage deviation is comparable for members of the same phage subcluster and distinct between subclusters. Neighbor joining phylogenetic trees were constructed on pairwise Euclidean distances between all genomes in the mycobacteriophage database. In almost every case, phage were placed in a monophyletic clade with members of the same subcluster. With few exceptions, trees computed from tetranucleotide usage deviation accurately reconstruct trees based on gene content for a subset of the mycobacteriophage population (Fig.1).

We also evaluated the possibility of assigning clusters to unknown phage based on tetranucleotide usage deviation. Under a simple nearest neighbor classifier, cluster assignments were recovered at a frequency greater than 98%.

In addition, we looked for evidence of horizontal gene transfer by using tetranucleotide difference index, a measure of the deviation in tetranucleotide usage from the genomic mean in a sliding window across the genome [3]. Tetranucleotide difference index plots showed a strong spike at the end of cluster L mycobacteriophages, which could indicate horizontal gene transfer in the region.

**Conclusions**

Genome analysis based on tetranucleotide usage shows promise for evaluating host-parasite coevolution and gene exchange within the mycobacteriophage population. These methods are computationally inexpensive and independent of gene annotation, making them optimal candidates for further research aimed at clustering phage and determining evolutionary relationships. Code for genome analysis and data used in this project are freely available at [https://github.com/bsiranosian/tango\_final].

**Introduction**

1. Mycobacteriophages
   1. Diversity
      1. Clustering
      2. Phenotype
      3. Genotype
   2. Collection methods
      1. Phage Hunters
      2. How this research came about
2. Alignment methods
   1. How genomes are clustered
   2. Concept of phams
   3. Drawbacks of alignment-based
3. Alignment-free methods
   1. General overview
   2. Specific methods
   3. Advantages
   4. Previous research
      1. David Pride
      2. Bacteriophage in gut microbiome

Bacteriophages isolated on mycobacterial hosts represent an incredibly diverse and widespread pool of viruses. Part of the estimated 1031 phage particles present at any one time on earth, mycobacteriophages play a large role in the turnover of bacteria (ref). As of April 2014, 663 mycobacteriophage genomes were available on the database phagesdb.org (ref). Phenotypically, mycobacteriophages fall into the class siphoviridae or myoviridae. Short tails, long tails, capsid dimensions and tail dimensions. Applications for treatment of TB.

The genomic sequences of mycobacteriophages are mosaic and diverse. Global GC content ranges from 50.3% to 70%, averaging 63.9%. Genome lengths range from 41kb to 165kb and average 67kb. Greater than 50,000 genes are found within the population but can be sorted into almost 4,000 groups, called phamilies, based on their shared amino acid sequence (ref). The majority of genes found in mycobacteriophages are of unknown function and do not have homologs in other phage or bacteria (Hatful 2014 information, should spice up a bit so it’s not a direct copy…). Mention something about “biological dark matter”

Despite the large diversity present in the population, mycobacteriophages can be grouped into distinct clusters based on their morphologic and genetic features. Some clusters are large and further divided into subclusters (cluster A, for example, with 11 subclusters and 246 members) while other are small (cluster S with 2 members). Some isolated phage have no nearest neighbor to define a cluster and are defined as singletons until further sampling supports their inclusion in a cluster. Mycobacteriophages are traditionally clustered based on four methods: dot-plot comparisons, pairwise average nucleotide identities, pairwise genome map comparisons and gene content analysis. These methods require sequence alignment or genome annotation – two classes of methods that are effective but computationally expensive and may require significant manual input (automated gene calls are verified by hand before a mycobacteriophage genome is submitted to genbank, for example).

Studying taxonomy of viruses is especially difficult because they lack a common subsequence on which to compute alignment based statistics, such as 16S rRNA in bacteria (ref 13-15 from Pride 2006)

Alignment-based methods do have their advantages and have served mycobacteriophage researchers well in the past. However, no groups to date have looked at alternative methods for analyzing these genomes. Specifically, a class of methods known as alignment-free methods. These techniques typically use statistics based on the occurrence of oligonucleotides in a sequence to compare genomes. Several different methods have been proposed and developed, such as D2, D\*, etc. For an excellent review, see the Vinga review paper. Alignment-free techniques avoid many of the problems associated with alignment-based methods, such as EXAMPLE and EXAMPLE. They are also much easier and faster to compute – alignment-free statistics can be computed in seconds on a personal laptop for the entire sequenced mycobacteriophage database, while pairwise genome alignment takes days on a computing cluster.

There are some drawbacks to alignment-free methods for analyzing genomes, mostly with the interpretation of the statistics in an evolutionary context. It can be difficult to understand how oligonucleotide frequencies are modified in a population over time when selection usually takes place at the level of genes.

Despite these drawbacks, alignment-free methods have been used to study genomic sequences in a variety of contexts. For example, Pride et al. (2006) found tetranucleotide usage in bacteriophages and host organisms to be similar. More recently, Ogilvie et al. (2103) surveyed metagenomic sequencing datasets using a tetranucleotide usage based method and discovered several novel bacteroides phage, the majority of which could not be identified with alignment-based methods.

We examined tetranucleotide usage in the mycobacteriophage population as an alternative to alignment based techniques. Tetranucleotide usage supports the grouping of phage into subclusters similar to the published techniques. However, subclusters of the same parent cluster were not always related, leading to some surprising conclusions.

The number of sequenced mycobacteriophages has grown immensely in the past few years thanks to the “Phage Hunters” program administered through the SEA Education Alliance and Howard Hughes Medical Institute. This program allows first year undergraduate students to isolate and characterize a novel mycobacteriophage from the environment. It has also provided excellent opportunities for collaborative projects between undergraduates, resulting in the work you see here.

RESULTS

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

Application to metagenomics sequencing and novel virus discovery

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