

Dating with constraints

A tutorial on McmcDate

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January 13, 2023

Abstract

McmcDate can date a phylogenetic tree with constraints. That is, it can estimate the ages of the ancestral nodes of a phylogenetic tree with node age calibrations, node order constraints, and node braces. McmcDate is fast because it approximates the phylogenetic likelihood with a multivariate normal distribution.

In this tutorial, we are going to date a phylogenetic tree of eukaryotes. We are going to use node age calibrations from fossils, and node order constraints from two possible successions of plastid endosymbiosis events.

Definitions and explanations

We use the term *(rooted) tree* to denote a directed acyclic graph with node labels and branch lengths, and in which not more than one branch connects any two nodes. Usually, nodes correspond to (ancestral) species, and branch lengths to sequence distance or time. We use the term *(rooted) topology* to denote a (rooted) tree without information about branch lengths. We put the word *rooted* into parentheses, because it is sometimes omitted. The root of the tree or topology is the only node with all branches pointing away to other nodes, and is the oldest node. Leaves are extant nodes with a single branch pointing towards them.

For a given topology, *dating a topology* (or sloppily: *dating a tree*) corresponds to finding branch lengths measured in real time — for example, in Million years — which describe the data in the *best* way. *Best* can mean different things, and we will carefully analyze what *best* means in our case.

Similarly, we use the term *unrooted tree* to denote an undirected acyclic graph with node labels and branch lengths, and in which not more than one branch connects any two nodes. Finally, we use the term *unrooted topology* to denote an unrooted tree without information about branch lengths. We need unrooted trees and topologies because we will use reversible substitution models (for a review, see Yang 2006) to infer unrooted trees with branch lengths measured in expected number of substitutions per unit time. Reversible substitution models are unable to discriminate between the two directions in time.

Dating a tree

The pipeline for dating a topology is:

1. Prepare a multi sequence alignment and an unrooted topology.
2. For this alignment and unrooted topology, infer a distribution of unrooted trees with branch lengths measured in expected number of substitutions per unit time.
3. Find a rooted topology to date. Prepare auxiliary data such as node age calibrations or node order constraints.
4. Date the topology with McmcDate. In particular, infer a distribution of rooted trees with branch lengths measured in real time.

The following sections describe the steps of the pipeline in detail.

Step 1: Provision of alignment and unrooted topology

Here, we are going to use data from eukaryotes (Strassert et al. 2021).

Step 2: Phylogenetic inference

- Use Phylobayes (Lartillot et al. 2013).
- Decide on evolutionary model depending on the size of the data set and the computational requirements. Recommended models from preferred but slow and complex to fast and simple: GTR+CAT+G4, LG+CAT+G4, LG+EDM64+G4, LG+C60+G4, LG+G4.

We specify an evolutionary model with exchangeabilities EX, and across-site compositional heterogeneity model ASCH as EX+ASCH. All discussed evolutionary models used for simulations as well as inferences implicitly use discrete gamma rate heterogeneity with four components.

- GTR model (Tavaré 1986).
- CAT model (Lartillot and Philippe 2004).
- Gamma rate variation model (Yang 1993).
- LG model (Le and Gascuel 2008).
- EDM model (Schrempf et al. 2020).
- C60 model (Quang et al. 2008)

Step 3: Preparation of rooted topology and auxiliary data

- Node order calibrations (Yang and Rannala 2005).
- Relative node order constraints (Szöllösi et al. 2022).
- McmcDate can also brace nodes (Appendix [Node braces](#)).

Step 4: Dating with McmcDate

- McmcDate is a Haskell program (Appendix [Internals of McmcDate](#)).

Node braces

Internals of McmcDate

McmcDate is a Haskell program.

Recommend cabal, but there is also stack (-s) option.

The [wrapper script](#) used in this tutorial tries to make a good compromise between usability and customizability. It exposes some, but not all functionality of McmcDate. Most notably,

- Based on [mcmc](#).
- Based on [elynx-tree](#).
- Explain code a bit (I guess mostly proposals).

Haskell modules

Modules containing definitions specific to the analysis:

Definitions Proposals and monitors, configuration.

Hamiltonian Hamiltonian proposal.

Main Functions to prepare the data, run and continue the Metropolis-Hastings-Green algorithm.

Options Handle command line options.

Probability Prior and likelihood functions.

State State space. If you try to understand what is going on, or if you want to change analysis settings, your starting point should be State.

Tools Miscellaneous tools.

References

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