

TOWARDS INTERPRETING ZOO NOTIC POTENTIAL OF BETACORONAVIRUS SEQUENCES WITH ATTENTION

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ABSTRACT

Current methods for viral discovery target evolutionarily conserved proteins that accurately identify virus families but remain unable to distinguish the zoonotic potential of newly discovered viruses. Here, we apply an attention-enhanced long-short-term memory (LSTM) deep neural net classifier to a highly conserved viral protein target to predict zoonotic potential across betacoronaviruses. The classifier performs with a 94% accuracy. Analysis and visualization of attention at the sequence and structure-level features indicate possible association between important protein-protein interactions governing viral replication in zoonotic betacoronaviruses and zoonotic transmission.

1 INTRODUCTION

The majority of viruses emerging in humans arise from animal hosts. For example, SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing the COVID-19 pandemic, belongs to the betacoronavirus (β -CoVs) family from which numerous other viruses have been described from multiple mammal species around the world. The typical method for surveilling for such viruses is to identify a conserved region of the genome. For instance, the RdRp (RNA-dependent RNA polymerase) gene is a highly conserved sequence that is commonly used to ascertain β -CoVs presence from sampled wildlife species. While this conserved nature makes RdRp sequences a reliable target for accurately identifying novel β -CoVs from field surveillance, it does not enable predictions about whether the virus poses a zoonotic threat to humans. This is because the RdRp sequences encode the polymerase responsible for replicating the RNA genome once inside the cell, which is not involved in host cell entry or the infection process. The disconnect between broad viral surveillance and accurate predictions about zoonotic potential of newly discovered viruses remains a major research frontier, which has been highlighted by the emergence of SARS-CoV-2. Numerous closely-related β -CoVs have been identified from field surveillance over the past several years, but no clear and cost-effective way to triage the zoonotic risk posed by these newly discovered viruses. Beyond quantifying the zoonotic risk posed by a novel virus, preventing their emergence also relies on differentiating the key elements that enable some viruses to successfully infect humans. In other words, explaining what viral structures enable high zoonotic potential will be critical for informing what downstream actions will be effective for preventing spillover and viral emergence.

Recent studies have shown stronger performance of machine learning based approaches for zoonotic transmission prediction task, when compared to homology based approaches, both at the protein sequence and gene sequence level (Eng et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2017; Li & Sun, 2018; Zhang et al., 2019; Mock et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013; Bartoszewicz et al., 2021). There is a consensus that deep models outperform shallow classifiers. Previous works have often used either feature vectors reflecting compositional and physicochemical properties of protein sequences or on word vectors. In a few studies, input features were augmented with structural details, e.g. Fischhoff et al. (2021). In this study, we develop a deep neural net classifier for predicting zoonotic potential of RdRp sequences. For this purpose, we employ an attention mechanism enhanced long short-term memory (LSTM) model (Hochreiter & Schmidhuber, 1997) trained on RdRp sequences, as attention Bahdanau et al. (2014) is known to better cope with longer length sequences than a simple LSTM model, as is the case here. The final model yields a 94% prediction accuracy.

For wide-spread adoption of deep learning models for high-stake tasks, such as zoonotic transmission prediction, it is important that such models are interpretable and explainable. Towards this

direction, we intend to interpret the attention signals of the intermediate layers of deep classifier by visualizing the attention on the amino acid characters of the sample sequences. We also investigate average attention difference between two classes as a function of the amino acid type. Finally, we visualize the learned attentions on the 3D RdRp structure, as the 3D structure of protein determines its function. Analysis of these internal workings of the classifier model provides important insights into likely mechanism of zoonotic transmission, as class-level attention differences map to the key protein-protein interaction sites. To our knowledge, this is the first machine learning model that provides sequence and structure-level understanding of zoonotic transmission potential of protein sequences.

2 DATA: RdRp SEQUENCE DATA AND LABEL ANNOTATION

We assembled a dataset of published RdRp gene sequences for all β -CoVs, freely available in GenBank (Benson et al., 2013).

For each published sequence, we added a binary label to designate zoonotic status based on the results of published research. The potential zoonotic sequences included ones similar or identical to sequences that caused MERS coronavirus (MERS-CoV) SARS. In the NCBI records, “SARS” was often used to describe these viruses; here we refer to SARS-CoV-1 to distinguish from SARS-CoV-2 causing the COVID-19 pandemic.

MERS-CoV or SARS-CoV-1 sequences found in humans were categorized as zoonotic. If no host species was identified for a sequence, we did not categorize zoonotic status for that sequence. Prior to modeling, all sequences for which we were unable to categorize zoonotic status were removed from the dataset. For sequences passaged or adapted through cell culture of a different species than the original host, we made no determination about zoonotic status, as passaging may have changed zoonotic capacity. These included viruses described as involving Vero cell culture, from African green monkey (*Cercopithecus aethiops*) cells (Ammerman et al., 2008; Tsui et al., 2003); mouse-adapted (Lu et al., 2009); recombinant; or LLC-MK2, cultured in rhesus monkey (*Macaca mulatta*) cells (e.g., Kaye et al. (2006)). Information about these forms of cell culture was often found in the host field in NCBI; or as part of “passage details” in the notes field. If a sequence originated in one person and was cultured in cells from a different human cell line prior to sequencing, we considered it to remain zoonotic as we did not expect differences among people to change the zoonotic status.

We also considered sequences found in animals to be zoonotic if the authors of the sequence considered it to be functionally identical to sequences found in people. For MERS-CoV, we emphasized virus taxonomic clade position and locality, which is related to clade position, as for MERS-CoV this information is more readily available than information about sequence similarity to human MERS-CoV. MERS-CoV in clades A and B include known human sequences and are known to cross from camels (*Camelus dromedarius*) to humans (Lau et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2014). For ambiguous MERS-CoV sequences, we categorized as zoonotic if there were human cases found in the same geographic area. MERS-CoV in Africa, in clade C, are similar but with no known human cases Chu et al. (2018). Clade C has lower titer and virulence in lab experiments, compared to clade A or B. We assumed that clade C MERS-CoV to be non-zoonotic.

For SARS-CoV-1 viruses found in animals, if insufficient information was available to confirm that the virus was zoonotic then it was labeled non-zoonotic. For example, SARS-CoV-1 viruses found in bats were categorized as non-zoonotic if no study was published associated with the sequence. SARS-CoV-1 reported in palm civet (*Paguma larvata*) were considered zoonotic if the authors considered it to be identical to sequences found in people Wang et al. (2005), and otherwise categorized as non-zoonotic (Yi, 2005). We considered as zoonotic a sequence isolated from an animal that also replicated in human cell lines, for example a SARS-CoV-1 from *Rhinolophus sinicus* bats that replicated in human cell culture (Ge et al., 2013). If the sequence was found in an animal species not known to be a bridge species to people, for example a ferret, we categorized it as non-zoonotic (Town et al., 2012).

3 METHODS

The resulting dataset contained a total of 4259 sequences of length up to 910 characters, with vocabulary of 21 amino acids (A, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, K, L, M, N, P, Q, R, S, T, V, W, X, Y). We use

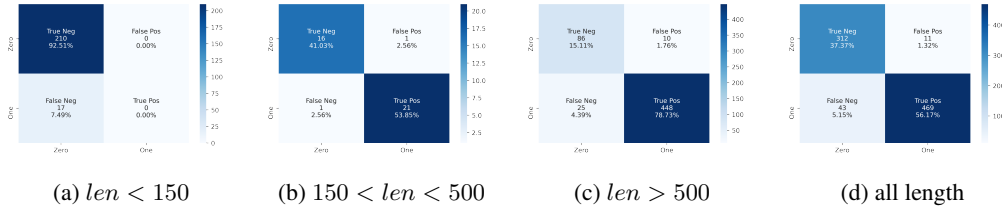


Figure 1: Model performance confusion matrix computed over range of sequence lengths

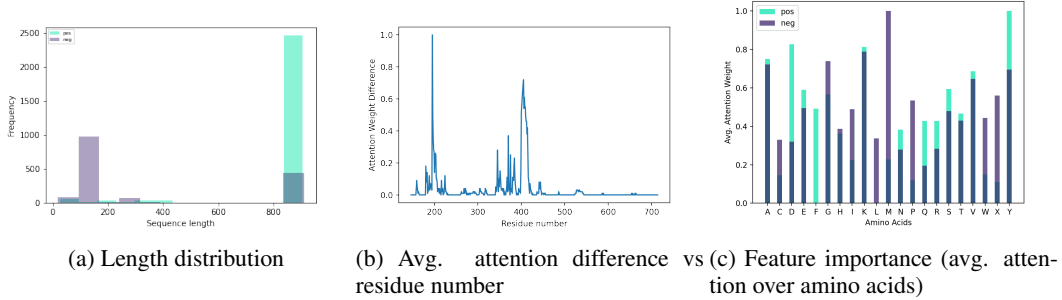


Figure 2: Data statistics and attention at 3D and 1D level plots.

60/20/20 ratio to create train/val/test split, resulting in 2548, 876 and 835 sequences respectively, maintaining the positive to negative ratio in each split. A LSTM model enhanced with a single head attention mechanism was trained on this RdRp sequence dataset to predict their zoonotic potential (as a binary classification task). The model architecture was comprised of a single encoded layer with single head attention Bahdanau et al. (2014). The model accepts in the sequence of amino acids $x = (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_L)$ and learns an embedding $z = (z_1, z_2, \dots, z_L)$, which is passed to a dropout layer followed by a RELU and a softmax layer. Best test accuracy of 94% was achieved after hyper-parameter search. More details are in SI section A.1

4 RESULTS

Zoonotic classification accuracy. In this study, we use an attention-enhanced classifier, as attention has been proved to be helpful for dealing with longer sequences (Bahdanau et al., 2016). In our dataset, the max sequence length is 910. Figure 2a shows the color coded length distribution of sequences for both positive and negative classes. The dataset is very length skewed. We see that the majority of zoonotic sequences are of length > 800 , while the shorter length < 200 are mostly non-zoonotic. Despite the classification challenges presented by this skew, the best performing model achieved an overall accuracy of 94%. Figure 1 shows confusion matrices for different length ranges. For shorter length sequences ($len < 150$), the classifier correctly predicted $> 92\%$ of the true negatives, but missed a small number of true positives. Improved predictions of true positives was achieved with increase in sequence length.

Interpretation using Attention Visualization. Mapping predictions back to a target sequence has been used both as a means of investigating a given model’s performance and as a method of sequence analysis. For example, convolutional filter visualization has been used for genome sequence classification (Bartoszewicz et al., 2021). Protein sequence position importance was investigated by an attention function in subcellular localization classification task (Jurtz et al., 2017). Recently, 3D visualization of attention of a Transformer protein sequence model revealed accurate capture of structural and binding properties (Vig et al., 2020). Similarly, in this study, we visualize and identify regions of 1D protein sequence and 3D protein structure that are important for the prediction of zoonotic potential. Figure 2c shows averaged normalized attentions for each amino acid character, estimated by averaging over all sequences within the same class. At the amino acid level, significant

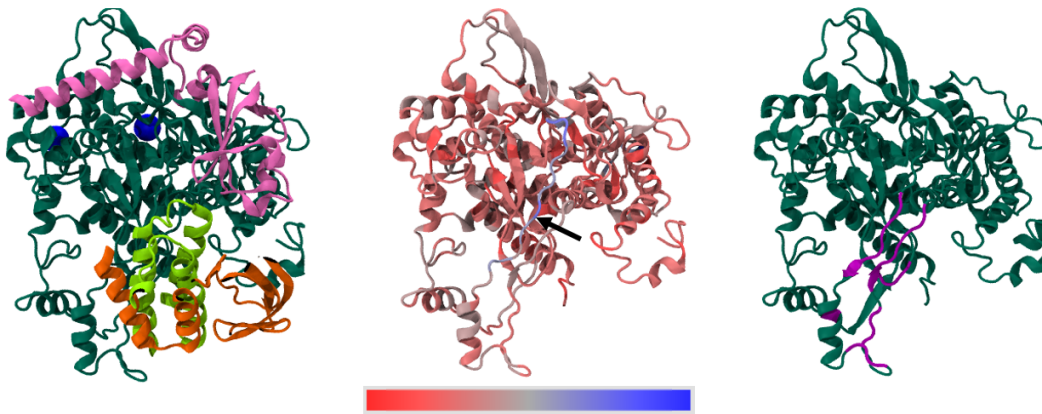


Figure 3: *Left* : Structure of SARS-CoV nsp12 RdRp bound to nsp7 and nsp8 co-factors (pdb id:6NUR). nsp12 is shown in dark green, nsp8 in pink and cyan, and nsp7 in light green. Metal ions are shown as blue spheres. *Middle* : Average attention differences between positive and negative class, mapped to the SARS-CoV nsp12 structure (6NUR.pdb chain A residue 146 to 714). Red-gray-blue (low to high) colorscale is used to visualize the attention heatmap. Black arrow highlights the *Right* : Regions of RdRp interacting (cutoff: 6.5 Å) with nsp7 highlighted in magenta.

differences in attention are evident between two classes. For example, relatively higher attention in positive sequences is found in the amino acids D, Y, R, F, and Q.

Since the 3D structure of the protein determines its function, we project the average attention heatmap differences between the two classes on the publicly available SARS-CoV nsp12 RdRp structure bound to the partnering nsp7 and nsp12 cofactor proteins (Kirchdoerfer & Ward, 2019)(Figure 3). Figure 2b show these attention differences as a function of residue number of nsp12 template. For selection criteria refer SI section A.2.1. Figure 4 further highlights these differences mapped on to the homology model (using SARS-CoV nsp12 as template) of individual sequences from the positive and negative class. These visualizations clearly show higher attentions within the positive sequences map to the N-terminal structural regions that correspond to the nsp12-nsp7 interaction surface. This result is interesting in light of prior work showing that the assembly of RdRp with cofactor proteins is crucial for polymerase activity that governs viral replication (Yin et al., 2020; Subissi et al., 2014). In fact, protein-protein interaction design has been shown as a proven approach for RdRp inhibition in other related viruses (Subissi et al., 2014).

5 DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

We present an attention-enhanced LSTM deep neural net classifier that predicts zoonotic transmission in β -CoVs. Crucially, this classification was achieved using widely available RdRp sequences. Accurate prediction of zoonotic potential from RdRp sequences in β -CoVs (or similarly used reliable primer sequences for other viral families) has the potential to alleviate a critical bottleneck in viral surveillance, which has so far been unable to infer zoonotic potential of novel viruses discovered as part of routine surveillance.

Further investigation of attention maps at both the sequence and the structure level provided important interpretability of the “black-box” model. Our results indicate mapping of class-level attention differences at protein-protein interaction sites of the RdRp structure. Those sites are of significant functional importance for binding with cofactors crucial for polymerase activity involved in viral replication. Thus, while RdRp itself is not directly involved in the infection process, physiochemical interactions with neighboring cofactors appear to influence the function of zoonotic β -CoVs compared to non-zoonotic counterparts. Future work will explore more sophisticated attention mechanism; multi-head (e.g. Transformers (Devlin et al., 2019) (Vaswani et al., 2017)) for better interpretability and prediction. We also plan extend the current study beyond β -CoVs to investigate the robustness in capturing of biological context via model features.

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A APPENDIX

A.1 MODEL DETAILS

A.1.1 THE MODEL

For sequential data, Recurrent Neural Networks were introduced but as the sequence grows, the RNNs, weights could grow beyond control or vanish. Long Short-Term Memory (Hochreiter & Schmidhuber, 1997) was proposed to deal with vanishing gradient problem (Hochreiter et al., 2001) and learn long-term dependency among longer time period. Attention further learns these dependencies in a smarter and relevant way (Luong et al., 2015; Galassi et al., 2020; Bahdanau et al., 2014).

LSTM estimates conditional probability $p(y_1, \dots, y_T | x_1, \dots, x_L)$. Our task was binary classification, so the input was sequence of characters (x_1, \dots, x_L) and output was binary probability vector among two classes, positive and negative such that $\sum_{t=1}^T p(y_t) = 1$. The LSTM computes this conditional probability by first obtaining the fixed-dimensional representation h of the input sequence and given by the last hidden state of the LSTM. We enhanced our model with attention so, a final hidden attentional state h'_t was computed which was passed to a dropout layer, RELU and followed by softmax to obtain predictive distribution over classes.

For the attention part, we used multiplicative attention (Luong et al., 2015). All the hidden states of the encoder LSTM h_t were used to compute context vector c_t . A variable length alignment vector was computed using current target hidden state h_t with each source hidden state h_s

$$\alpha_t(s) = \text{align}(h_t, h_s) = \frac{\exp(\text{score}(h_t, h_s))}{\sum_{s'} \exp(\text{score}(h_t, h_{s'}))} \quad (1)$$

Here, *score* is content-based function for which we used dot product, refer (Luong et al., 2015) for other alternatives.

$$score(h_t, h_s) = h_t^T h_s \quad (2)$$

Given the alignment vector as weights, the context vector c_t is computed as the weighted average over all the source hidden states. (Luong et al., 2015).

We took the dot product of the last hidden state as the target h_t and context vector c_t produce attentional hidden state. This attentional vector h'_t was then passed to softmax layer get predictive distribution over the positive and negative class:

$$p(y_t | y < t, x) = softmax(W_s, h'_t) \quad (3)$$

A.1.2 TRAINING DETAILS

We used a unidirectional LSTM with single layer and single head attention with 1000 cells (max sequence length) and 200 dimensional word embeddings (amino acid characters in our case) with a vocabulary of 21 amino acids. Hyper-parameter search was conducted and model giving best accuracy was found with the configuration of input embedding layer of size 200, lstm hidden layer of size 200, dropout 0.2, trained for 20 epochs. The baseline LSTM model with no attention gave 85% accuracy.

A.2 ATTENTION ANALYSIS METHODS

For interpreting the model, we carried different analysis on the attention vectors. Visualization of average attention vectors looked into the overall trends distributed into positive and negative classes at the structure level. In addition, we also investigated attention at each sample/individual level.

A.2.1 SEQUENCE SELECTION CRITERIA FOR AVERAGE ATTENTION ANALYSIS

We used attention vectors of the trained LSTM model and carried out detailed analysis on them. We computed average attention (shown in figure 3) of filtered positive (zoonotic) and negative (non-zoonotic) classes, to have an insight into what model learns about structural differences between the two classes. For mapping to a template structure, positive and negative sequences that are highly similar to SARS-CoV nsp12 RdRp structure bound to nsp7 and nsp8 co-factors (pdbid:6NUR) were selected.

Sequence similarity between RdRp sequences and fixed target 6NUR was computed using NCBI BLAST similarity search (Altschul et al., 1990). Command used is 'blastp' using an eval of 10, word size of 3, the BLOSUM62 substitution matrix, a gap open penalty of 9, a gap extension penalty of 1, threshold of 16, comp based stats set to 0 and window size of 15. Sequences with *alignment len* > 900, *identities* > 90%, *gaps* = 0 and predicted correctly (true positives and true negatives) by our classifier model are selected. 277 positive and 26 negative sequences are chosen for this analysis shown in figures 3 and 2b.

A.2.2 HOMOLOGY MODELING FOR INDIVIDUAL LEVEL ATTENTION ANALYSIS

For visualizing attention at the structural (3D) level of individual positive and negative sequences (shown in figure 4), their structure prediction was required as the structures for these surveilled RdRp sequences were not available in the Protein Data Bank (PDB (Berman et al., 2000)). For the same, homology modeling was conducted using SWISS-MODEL server (Waterhouse et al., 2018) using NSP12 Chain A as the template. Figure 3, 5, 6 and 7 display attention visualization on structure and sequence level for pair of true positive and true negative long length and short length sequences.

Highly homologous sequences were filtered using *identities* > 70% and *gaps* = 0. Alignment length > 900 gave longer length selections and for shorter length we set alignment length between 200 to 300. We employed homology modeling of these highly similar sequences using Swiss-model server.

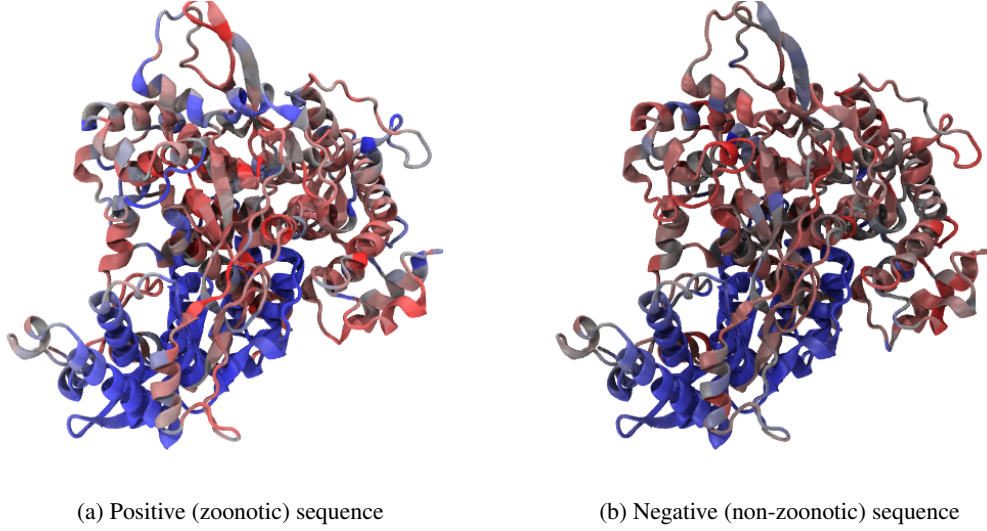


Figure 4: Attention heatmap of one positive and one negative sequences with length > 900 mapped on to their modeled structure obtained using homology modeling (6NUR.pdb chain A used as template). Colorscale used: red-gray-blue (low to high)

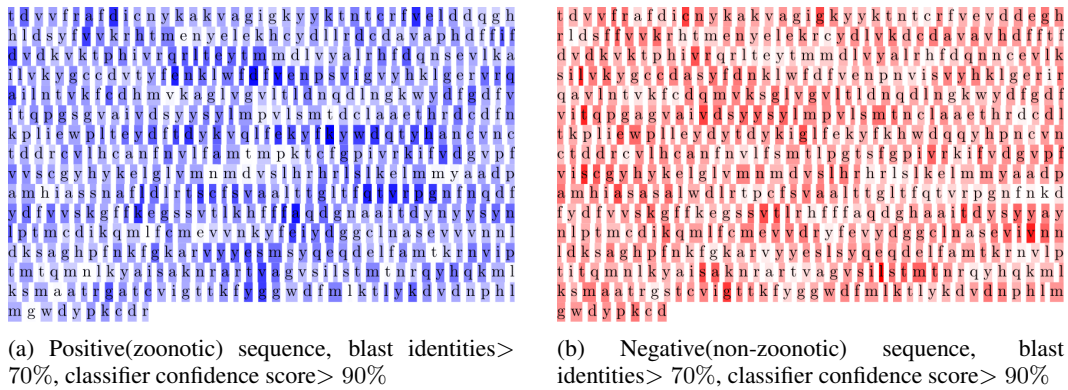


Figure 5: Attention heatmap of one positive and one negative sequences with length > 900 at sequence 1D level. Positive with blue and negative with red.

