
Codon usage in bacteria: correlation with gene expressivity

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ABSTRACT

The nucleic acid sequence bank now contains over 600 protein coding genes of which 107 are from prokaryotic organisms. Codon frequencies in each new prokaryotic gene are given. Analysis of genetic code usage in the 83 sequenced genes of the *Escherichia coli* genome (chromosome, transposons and plasmids) is presented, taking into account new data on gene expressivity and regulation as well as iso-tRNA specificity and cellular concentration. The codon composition of each gene is summarized using two indexes: one is based on the differential usage of iso-tRNA species during gene translation, the other on choice between Cytosine and Uracil for third base. A strong relationship between codon composition and mRNA expressivity is confirmed, even for genes transcribed in the same operon. The influence of codon use on peptide elongation rate and protein yield is discussed. Finally, the evolutionary aspect of codon selection in mRNA sequences is studied.

INTRODUCTION

Bacteria, and especially *Escherichia coli*, furnish the best documented example of the effect of natural selection on codon usage. The resulting bias in genetic code usage has two main components: correlation with tRNA availability in the cell and non random choices between pyrimidine ending codons. We present here two simple indexes to quantify these components and characterize all 107 bacterial sequences in the Lyon sequence bank ACNUC.

The *E. coli* sample (83 sequences) can now be considered as representative of the whole genome since it contains sequences from the chromosome as well as from plasmids and transposons. These sequences code for structural proteins (membrane and ribosomal proteins), for enzymes (amino acid biosynthesis operons) and for regulatory proteins (repressors, *lexA* and *recA* genes). Also, copious data on primary structure, codon recognition and relative abundance of *E. coli* tRNA species are available. Finally, regulating mechanisms and cellular concentrations of translation products are known for many genes in our sample, the latter, however, often on a qualitative basis. These data permit a more precise approach to the relationship between codon usage and translation efficiency and a somewhat new evolutionary point of view.

All genes studied here can be identified with Table 1. Sequence sources appear in the list of sequence references at the end of the paper. Table 2 shows the codon composition of 85 new genes not already presented in our last two compilations (1,2). As previously, codon compositions are expressed per 1000 and both initiator and stop codons are excluded from the data. *E. coli* *ilvG* gene (symbol ECOILVG) is given again because this nucleotide sequence has been redetermined and another reading frame has been proposed (3,4). Genes for elongation factor G (ECOEFNG) and ribosomal protein S7 (ECOS7) are also re-included because more of their codons have been sequenced.

CODON USAGE AND tRNA AVAILABILITY

The first relationship between codon occurrences in mRNAs and cellular tRNA abundancies described in the literature is known as the tRNA adaptation theory (5,6). This phenomenon has been observed in many specialized cells mainly involved in the translation of very few mRNA species. This is not the case of *E. coli* cell. However, the high use of codons corresponding to major tRNAs was remarked by Post et al. upon sequencing ribosomal protein (r-protein) genes (7,8). Since then, various workers have observed the same tendency in many other highly expressed genes, i.e. genes coding for abundant proteins (see the r-proteins, elongation factors and membrane proteins items in the list of sequence references). Ikemura quantified the relative frequencies of tRNA species in *E. coli* and presented an elegant demonstration of the correlation between codon use in messengers and tRNA cellular quantities (9,10). The linear correlation coefficient computed on several genes discriminates between high and low expressivity genes with exceptions that seem mainly due to mathematical artifacts (10). Following the work of one of us (11,12) we construct here a measure of the influence of tRNA availability based on a model of protein synthesis dynamics

At the beginning of each polypeptide elongation cycle, a codon is found at the ribosomal A-site. The ternary complexes (aminoacyl-tRNAs bound with elongation factor Tu and GTP) diffusing in the cytoplasm interact with the codon and the ribosome at the A-site. Most often the codon does not belong to the tRNA recognition spectrum and therefore the aminoacyl-tRNA dissociates from the ribosome. When the specificity condition is fulfilled, the elongation cycle starts: transpeptidation and translocation occur. Thus, each codon can be characterized by the average number of codon-tRNA interactions at the A-site during one elongation cycle. The relative concentration of the codon-cognate tRNA is equivalent to its probability of colliding with the A-site

Table 1: mRNA sequence portfolio

Symbol	Species and gene	No Codons
ECOLPP	<i>E. coli</i> outer membrane lipoprotein	77
ECOOMPA	<i>E. coli</i> ompA gene	345
ECOS2	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal protein S2	240
ECOS4	<i>E. coli</i> ribos. prot. S4 3' partial seq.	60
ECOS7	<i>E. coli</i> ribos. prot. S7 5' & 3' partial seq.	112
ECOS10	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal protein S10	102
ECOS11	<i>E. coli</i> ribos. prot. S11 5' partial seq.	55
ECOS12	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal protein S12	123
ECOS13	<i>E. coli</i> ribos. prot. S13 partial sequence	35
ECOS17	<i>E. coli</i> ribos. prot. S17 3' partial seq.	24
ECOS20	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal protein S20 UUG initiator	86
ECOL1	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal protein L1	233
ECOL3	<i>E. coli</i> ribos. prot. L3 5' partial seq.	79
ECO712	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal proteins L7/L12	120
ECOL10	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal protein L10	164
ECOL11	<i>E. coli</i> ribosomal protein L11	141
ECOL14	<i>E. coli</i> ribos. prot. L14 5' partial seq.	19
ECOTUFA	<i>E. coli</i> elong. factor Tu (tufA) GUG initiator	393
ECOTUFB	<i>E. coli</i> elong. factor Tu (tufB)	393
ECOEFG	<i>E. coli</i> elongation factor G 5' & 3' partial seq.	114
ECOEFTS	<i>E. coli</i> elongation factor Ts (tsf)	282
ECORECA	<i>E. coli</i> recA	352
ECORPOA	<i>E. coli</i> RNA polymerase α -subunit 5' partial seq.	158
ECORPOB	<i>E. coli</i> RNA polymerase β -subunit	1341
ECORPOC	<i>E. coli</i> RNA polym. β' -subunit 5' partial seq.	510
ECORPOD	<i>E. coli</i> RNA polymerase σ -subunit	612
ECOALRS	<i>E. coli</i> alanyl-tRNA-synthetase	875
ECOUNC1	<i>E. coli</i> hypoth. gene unc1 GUG initiator	129
ECOUNC2	<i>E. coli</i> a-subunit of ATP-synthase (unc2)	270
ECOUNC3	<i>E. coli</i> c-subunit of ATP-synthase (unc3)	78
ECOUNC4	<i>E. coli</i> b-subunit of ATP-synthase (unc4)	155
ECOUNC5	<i>E. coli</i> δ -subunit of ATP-synthase (unc5)	176
ECOUNCA	<i>E. coli</i> α -subunit of ATP-synthase (uncA)	512
ECOUNCG	<i>E. coli</i> γ -subunit of ATP-synthase (uncG)	286
ECOUNCD	<i>E. coli</i> β -subunit of ATP-synthase (uncD)	459
ECOUNCC	<i>E. coli</i> ϵ -subunit of ATP-synthase (uncC)	132
ECOLACI	<i>E. coli</i> lacI lac operon repressor	359
ECOLACZ	<i>E. coli</i> lacZ β -galactosidase 3' partial seq.	24
ECOLACY	<i>E. coli</i> lacY lactose permease	416
ECOLACA	<i>E. coli</i> lacA transacetylase 5' partial seq.	25
ECOTRPL	<i>E. coli</i> trpL attenuation of trp operon	13
ECOTRPE	<i>E. coli</i> trpE anthranilate synthetase component I	519
ECOTRPD	<i>E. coli</i> trpD	530
ECOTRPC	<i>E. coli</i> trpC	451
ECOTRPB	<i>E. coli</i> trpB	397
ECOTRPA	<i>E. coli</i> trpA	267
ECOTRPR	<i>E. coli</i> trpR trp & aroH operons repressor	107
ECOILVL	<i>E. coli</i> ilvL attenuation of ilv operon	31
ECOILVG	<i>E. coli</i> ilvG (mutant Valine resistant)	520
ECOILVE	<i>E. coli</i> ilvE 5' partial sequence	80
ECOTHRL	<i>E. coli</i> thrL attenuation of thr operon	20
ECOTHRA	<i>E. coli</i> thrA	819
ECOPHEL	<i>E. coli</i> pheL attenuation of phe operon	14

Symbol	Species and gene	No Codons
ECOHISL	<i>E. coli</i> hisL attenuation of his operon	15
ECOAMPC	<i>E. coli</i> ampC cephalosporinidase	376
ECOARAC	<i>E. coli</i> araC ara operon regulation	291
ECOAROH	<i>E. coli</i> aroH 5' & 3' partial sequence	152
ECOASNA	<i>E. coli</i> asnA asparagine synthetase	329
ECOFOL	<i>E. coli</i> dihydrofolate reductase	158
ECOLEXA	<i>E. coli</i> lexA	201
ECOLTA	<i>E. coli</i> heat-labile toxin, A-subunit partial seq.	124
ECOLTB	<i>E. coli</i> heat-labile toxin, B-subunit	123
ECONDH	<i>E. coli</i> ndh NADH dehydrogenase	433
ECOPHOA	<i>E. coli</i> phoA alkaline phosphatase	76
ECOR1EN	<i>E. coli</i> restriction endonuclease R1	276
ECOR1ME	<i>E. coli</i> restriction methylase R1	325
ECOTNAA	<i>E. coli</i> tnaA tryptophanase	470
ECOUVRB	<i>E. coli</i> uvrB	28
ECOTN3L	<i>E. coli</i> transposon TN3 β -lactamase	285
ECOTN3T	<i>E. coli</i> transposon TN3 tnpA transposase	1014
ECOTN3R	<i>E. coli</i> transposon TN3 repressor	184
ECOTN9	<i>E. coli</i> transposon TN9 chloramphenicol resistance	218
ECO903K	<i>E. coli</i> transposon TN903 kanamycin resistance	270
ECPFOL	plasmid R388 dihydrofolate reductase	77
CLOIMMU	plasmid CLO-DF13 immunity gene	84
CLOH	plasmid CLO-DF13 gene H	48
RIPOR11	plasmid R1 hypoth. gene ori1 10500 d protein	85
RIPOR12	plasmid R1 hypoth. gene ori2 7000 d protein	60
SM1RA1	plasmid SM1 repA1 gene GUG initiator	284
SM1RA2	plasmid SM1 repA2 gene	102
SAULRER	plasmid PE194 erythromycin resist. regulator	18
SAURERY	plasmid PE194 erythromycin resistance	243
SAUBLAC	<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> β -lactamase	46
STYTRPL	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> trpL attenuation trp operon	13
STYTRPE	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> trpE	519
STYTRPD	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> trpD 5' partial seq.	193
STYTRPB	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> trpB	396
STYTRPA	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> trpA	267
STYILVL	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> ilvL attenuation ilv operon	31
STYHISL	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> hisL attenuation his operon	15
STYHISJ	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> hisJ	259
STYLEUL	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> leuL attenuation leu operon	27
STYARGT	<i>Salmonella typhimurium</i> argT	259
SALHIN	<i>Salmonella</i> hin protein	189
SMALPP	<i>Serratia marcescens</i> outer membrane lipoprotein	76
SMATRPE	<i>Serratia marcescens</i> trpE 3' partial sequence	26
SMATRPG	<i>Serratia marcescens</i> trpG	192
SDYTRPE	<i>Shigella dysenteriae</i> trpE 3' partial sequence	26
SDYTRPD	<i>Shigella dysenteriae</i> trpD 5' partial sequence	193
EAMLPP	<i>Erwinia amylovora</i> outer membrane lipoprotein	77
KAETRPB	<i>Klebsiella aerogenes</i> trpB 3' partial sequence	19
KAETRPA	<i>Klebsiella aerogenes</i> trpA	268
KPNNIFH	<i>Klebsiella pneumoniae</i> nifH nitrogenase 2	292
ANANIFH	<i>Anabaena nifH</i> nitrogenase reductase	298
RHINIFH	<i>Rhizobium meliloti</i> nifH nitrogenase	296
BLIPEN	<i>Bacillus licheniformis</i> penicillinase	306
HALRHO	<i>Halobacterium halobium</i> bacteriorhodopsin	261

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- SMATRPG same reference as STYTRPD
- SDYTRPE same reference as STYTRPD
- SDYTRPD same reference as STYTRPD
- EAMLPP Yamagata, H., Nakamura, K., Inouye, M.: *J. Biol. Chem.*, 256, 2194-2198 (1981)

KAETRPB	Nichols, B.P., Blumenberg, M., Yanofsky, C.: Nucleic Acids Res., 9,1743-1755 (1981)
KAETRPA	same reference as KAETRPB
KPNNIFH	Sundaresan, V., Ausubel, F.M.: J. Biol. Chem., 256, 2808-2812 (1981)
ANANIFH	Mevarech, M., Rice, D., Haselkorn, R.: Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA, 77, 6476-6480 (1980)
RHINIFH	Torok, I., Kondorosi, A.: Nucleic Acids Res., 9, 5711-5723 (1981)
BLIPEN	Neugebauer, K., Sprengel, R., Schaller, H.: Nucleic Acids Res., 9, 2577-2588 (1981)
HALRHO	Dunn, R., Mc Coy, J., Simsek, M., Majumdar, A., Chang, S.H., Rajbhandary, U.L., Khorana, H.G.: Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA, 78, 6744-6748 (1981)

codon. Hence, if this probability is f , the mean number of codon-tRNA interactions necessary for the elongation cycle to occur is $1/f$. The rarest tRNA species in *E. coli* is tRNA₂^{Ile} decoding codon AUA (0.3% of the total tRNA population, (9) and legend to fig. 1); the most abundant species is tRNA₃^{Gly} decoding GGP codons (6.5% of the tRNA population). Consequently, $1/0.003 = 333$ non specific codon-tRNA interactions are necessary, on the average, to translate the AUA codon, whereas an average of $1/0.065 = 15$ such interactions occur when translating GGU or GGC codons. For a given gene, we weight the mean number of non specific codon-tRNA interactions for each codon by the relative frequency of the codon in the sequence. The value thus obtained is the average number of tRNA discriminations per elongation cycle (PI index). This index is scaled on the abscissa of fig. 1.

All highly expressed genes appear to the left of the figure. These are genes coding for major membrane proteins, for the 3 elongation factors Tu, Ts and G, for r-proteins, and the *recA* gene, which is not constitutively highly expressed as are the preceding messengers. These genes are therefore highly optimized for a small number of tRNA discriminations. We calculate that the best theoretical messenger for the L1 r-protein (ECOL1) would require 22.3 mean discriminations instead of the observed value of 25.5. Translation of a codon whose cognate tRNA is rare in the cell requires more non specific codon-tRNA interactions at the A-site than do codons decoded by major tRNAs. Consequently, translation of the latter codons might be faster and/or less error-prone than translation of other synonymous codons. A quantitative assessment of this phenomenon is not yet possible since the duration of a non specific codon-tRNA interaction is unknown (11). Therefore, given the available data, PI is the best possible index for quantifying the effect of codon use on translation rate.

	ECO \$2	ECO \$4	ECO \$7	ECO \$10	ECO \$17	ECO \$20	ECO \$3	ECO L14	ECO TUFA	ECO TUBB	ECO EFFG	ECO EFTS	ECO RPOA	ECO RPOB	ECO RPOC	ECO RPOD	ECO ALRS	ECO UNC1	ECO UNC2	ECO UNC3	ECO UNC4	ECO UNC5	ECO UNC6
ARG	CGA 20	16	40	32	40	20	10	5	3	3	10	9	1	2	2	20	2	1	0	0	0	0	0
	CCG 33	50	36	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	10	2	4	4	40	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CCC 30	50	36	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	10	2	4	4	40	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
	AGG 30	50	36	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	4	10	2	4	4	40	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
LEU	CUA 9	67	60	5	12	5	2	5	6	6	10	5	5	7	7	60	6	13	11	11	4	2	0
	CUC 7	17	10	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CUU 7	17	10	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CUA 7	17	10	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	UUA 7	17	10	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	UUG 7	17	10	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SER	UCA 13	17	10	0	6	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	UCC 17	50	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	UCU 17	50	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	AGU 6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
THR	ACA 25	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	ACC 9	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	ACG 9	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CCU 20	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PRO	CCA 20	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CCU 20	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CCU 20	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ALA	GCA 21	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GCC 17	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GCU 17	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
GLY	GGU 20	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GGU 50	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
VAL	GUA 21	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GUC 9	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GUG 9	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GUU 9	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
LYS	AAA 52	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	AAG 50	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ASN	AAC 50	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	AUU 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
GLN	CAA 20	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CAG 20	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
HIS	CAC 21	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	CAU 4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
GLU	GAA 50	67	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GAC 50	67	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ASP	GAU 57	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	GAA 17	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TYR	UAU 6	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	UAC 6	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
CYS	UGC 4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	UGU 0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
PHE	UUU 42	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	UUU 6	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
ILE	AUA 6	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	AUU 13	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MET	AUG 20	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TRP	UGG 13	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

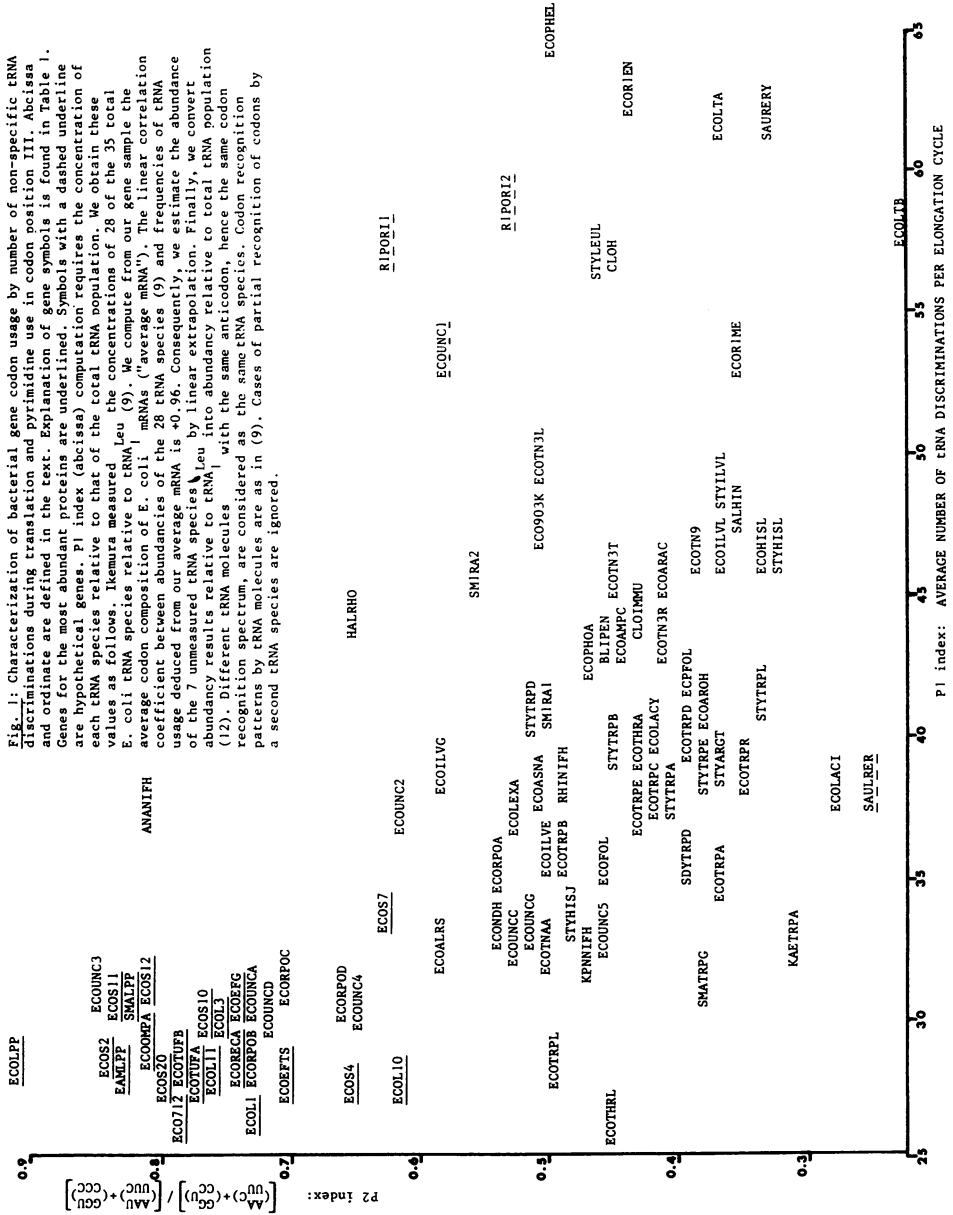


Fig. 1: Characterization of bacterial gene codon usage by number of non-specific tRNA discriminations during translation and pyrimidine use in codon position III. Abscissa and ordinate are defined in the text. Explanation of gene symbols is found in Table 1. Genes for the most abundant proteins are underlined. Symbols with a dashed underline are hypothetical genes. P1 index (abscissa) computation requires the concentration of each tRNA species relative to that of the total tRNA population. We obtain these values as follows. Ikemura measured Leu the concentrations of 28 of the 35 total $E. coli$ tRNA species relative to tRNA Leu (9). We compute from our gene sample the average codon composition of $E. coli$ mRNAs ("average mRNA"). The linear correlation coefficient between abundances of the 28 tRNA species (9) and frequencies of tRNA usage deduced from our average mRNA is +0.96. Consequently, we estimate the abundance of the 7 unmeasured tRNA species Leu by linear extrapolation. Finally, we convert abundance results relative to tRNA Leu into abundance relative to total tRNA population (12). Different tRNA molecules, with the same anticodon, hence the same codon recognition spectrum, are considered as the same tRNA species. Codon recognition patterns by tRNA molecules are as in (9). Cases of partial recognition of codons by a second tRNA species are ignored.

The results in fig. 1 suggest that translation of highly expressed mRNAs is faster than translation of others. The complex relationship between translation rate and mRNA protein yield has been analyzed by Bergmann and Lodish (13). Briefly, these authors show that the main factor determining protein yield is initiation rate, but that elongation and initiation rates can interact and modulate protein yield.

Plasmid and transposon genes generally have a PI index value greater than 43, indicating that the cellular tRNA population is poorly adapted to their codon usage. Conversely, few chromosomal genes are located in the same region of fig. 1. *E. coli* mRNAs falling there are very weakly expressed: toxin genes (ECOLTA and ECOLTB), the Eco RI restriction enzyme system (ECORIEN endonuclease and ECORIME methylase), two leader genes of amino acid biosynthesis operons (ECOPHEL and STYLEUL) and an hypothetical regulatory gene in unc operon (ECOUNC1).

Genes from enterobacteriaceae other than *E. coli* (*Salmonella*, *Serratia*, *Shigella*, *Klebsiella* and *Erwinia* (14)) closely follow *E. coli* codon usage as seen with genes sequenced in both species, namely *lpp* and *trp* operon genes. Genes from non enteric bacteria (*Anabaena*, *Bacillus*, *Rhizobium*, *Staphylococcus* and the archaeobacterium *Halobacterium*) have been included for completeness, but the PI index, based on the *E. coli* tRNA population, may be meaningless for them.

CHOICE BETWEEN PYRIMIDINES IN CODON POSITION III

Grosjean et al. first noted in the MS2 phage genome a bias in the choice between C and U bases in codon position III (15). They found that nucleotides in the degenerate position consistently yield a codon-anticodon binding energy of intermediate strength. For example, AAC appears more often than AAU, and GCU more often than GCC. This bias is independent of amino acid composition (whatever the bases X_1 and X_2 , codons X_1X_2C and X_1X_2U code for the same amino acid) and of tRNA availability (X_1X_2C and X_1X_2U are mainly decoded by the same tRNA (9)). Our group showed by statistical analysis of 29 bacterial genes that this bias is not present in all sequences, as already recognized by Fiers and Grosjean in the *lac I* gene (16), but strongly depends on the expressivity level of the gene (2). Ikemura later stated the same conclusion (9,10). If the first two bases of a codon are both A or U, C in third position will give a codon-anticodon binding energy nearer the mean than would U. Likewise, if the first two bases are both C or G, the "right choice" for third base is U, for C would give a strong binding energy.

Consequently, we characterize each messenger by the frequency of "right

choices" between the pyrimidines among codons beginning with AA, AU, UA, UU, CC, CG, GC or GG. This frequency, called P2 index, is scaled on the ordinate of fig. 1. As with P1 index, a discrimination between messengers for abundant and rare proteins occurs. The highly expressed genes appear in the upper left part of the figure.

In order to summarize the optimal choice between synonymous codons, we compute the mean frequency of each codon after pooling all highly expressed genes, that is genes with underlined symbols in fig. 1. The results, HIGH. EXPR. column of Table 2, clearly show the two tendencies in codon usage discussed (the codon recognition patterns of *E. coli* tRNA species are given in (9)).

The interpretation of pyrimidine selection given by Grosjean et al. involves the energy level of the codon-anticodon interaction (15) and is connected to translational fidelity (29). However, the nature of the effect of U/C choice on mRNA translation remains unclear. This effect cannot be restricted to fidelity because we show here that pyrimidine choice is related to gene expressivity.

AN INTRA-OPERON RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENE EXPRESSIVITY AND CODON USAGE

To examine more precisely the relationships between codon usage and gene expressivity, we reviewed the available quantitative data (Table 3). Although these data are not numerous, a general agreement with fig. 1 results: clearly, all genes coding for the most abundant proteins are clustered to the top left of fig. 1. The nine *unc* (or *atp*) operon genes and the four RNA-polymerase subunit genes of *E. coli* merit more comment, however.

The completely sequenced *unc* operon comprises 8 structural genes coding for the 8 polypeptides that form the ATP-synthase complex and a hypothetical control gene *unc1* (17-19). All these genes are controlled by the same promoter. Products of genes *uncA*, *uncD*, *unc5*, *uncG* and *uncC* form the F_1 -part of the ATP-synthase complex with the stoichiometry 3:3:1:1:1 (18-21). The *unc2*, *unc3* and *unc4* gene products, respectively the a, c and b polypeptides, form together the F_0 -part of the same complex (17). The stoichiometry of the F_0 -part is unclear, but the c peptide appears in more than 5 copies and the a and b peptides in 1 or 2 copies in the complex (21). The positions in fig. 1 of these 8 structural genes correlate with the gene product copy numbers in the ATP-synthase complex. Genes with high copy numbers (*unc3*, *uncA* and *uncD*) have a higher P2 index value and generally a lower P1 value than genes with low copy numbers (*unc5*, *uncG* and *uncC*). As stressed by Fillingame, the coordinate expression of the 8 *unc* operon structural genes probably involves unidentified post-transcriptional mechanisms (21).

Three of the four RNA-polymerase genes (rpoB, C and D) are located in fig. 1 with the highly expressed genes while rpoA is not. Table 3 shows that these genes correspond to proteins of medium abundance and that rpoA is more highly expressed than the other three genes because its product, the α -subunit appears in 2 copies in the holoenzyme (22). Note however that this is constitutive expressivity level; it is therefore difficult to compare with the lac and trp genes whose levels are for maximum derepression. The rpoA gene is co-transcribed with other r-protein genes in this order: rpsM (S13), rpsK (S11), rpsD (S4), rpoA and rplQ (L17) (23). No regulatory feature in the operon primary structure is apparent between the first 3 r-protein genes and rpoA, although the expressivities of these genes are markedly different (24). The locations in fig. 1 of rpsK (ECOS11), rpsD (ECOS4) and rpoA genes show that the same correlation between codon usage and gene expressivity holds for this operon as for the unc operon. However, only part of these last 3 genes has been sequenced, hence we cannot be sure of their overall coding strategy. On the other hand, rpoD is part of a single-gene operon (25) while rpoB and C are co-transcribed with rplJ (L10) and rplL (L7/L12, symbol ECO712) but a transcription attenuator site, which has been shown to function actively in vivo (26), is present in the nucleotide sequence between rplL and rpoB, C genes (27).

Table 3: Cellular contents of various E. coli gene products.

Symbol, gene and product	No. molecules per genome	Ref.
ECOLPP lpp (outer membrane lipoprotein)	330,000	31
ECOTUF- tufA,B (elongation factor Tu)	89,000	11 [§] , 32
ECORECA recA	38,000 ^{&}	33
ECOOMPA ompA (outer membrane protein)	36,800	34
ECO712 rplL (L7 and L12 r-proteins)	25,000	34
other r-proteins	9,200	11 [§]
ECOEFTS tsf (elongation factor Ts)	9,200	11 [§]
ECOEFG fusa (elongation factor G)	9,200	11 [§]
ECORPOA rpoA (α -subunit of RNA-polymerase)	4,000	34
ECOLACY lacY (lactose permease)	3,300 ^{&}	35
ECOTRP- trpA-E (tryptophan biosynthesis)	3,100 ^{&}	36
ECORPOB rpoB (β -subunit of RNA-polymerase)	1,400	34
ECORPOC rpoC (β' -subunit of RNA-polymerase)	1,400	34, 37
ECOALRS (aminoacyl-tRNA-synthetases)	500-1,300	34
ECOARAC araC (ara operon regulation)	100	38
ECOTRPR trpR (trp and aroH operons repressor)	30	39
ECOLACI lacI (lac operon repressor)	10	40

Data have been computed for a cell growth rate of 1.5 doublings per hour when possible.

[&]variable with growth conditions, value for maximum derepression.

[§]see references therein.

In addition to the RNA-polymerase genes and unc operon, other cases exist where several genes in one operon are sequenced. Three operons have been completely sequenced in *E. coli*. 1) trp operon: trpL, trpE, trpD, trpC, trpB and trpA genes (also partly sequenced in *Salmonella typhimurium*, *Serratia marcescens*, *Shigella dysenteriae* and *Klebsiella aerogenes*); 2) rpl operon: rplK (L11) and rplA (L1) genes; 3) elongation factor Ts operon: rpsB (S2) and tsf (EF-Ts) genes. Examples of partly sequenced operons are rpsL (S2), rpsG (S7), fusA (EF-G) and tufA (EF-Tu) genes; rpsJ (S10) and rplC (L3) genes and finally genes for the Eco RI restriction and modification enzymes (symbols ECORIEN and ECORIME). In all these cases, both the expressivity level and codon composition of genes from each operon (fig. 1) are similar. We cannot interpret Fig. 1 location of ilv operon genes (ilvL, G and E) since data on their expressivity are lacking. Moreover, ilvG is a peculiar cryptic gene (4).

The leader genes for amino acid biosynthesis operons (hisL, ilvL, pheL, thrL and trpL in *E. coli* and *S. typhimurium*) are exceptions to this observation, being widely scattered throughout fig. 1. We believe they are not adequately represented by this method because peculiar constraints are exerted on their structure (28).

This analysis of genes in the same operon argues for a relationship between P2 index (U/C choice in degenerate position) and the relative level of gene expressivity. Thus, codon usage may be involved in expressivity tuning of genes in the same operon according to cell needs. Nevertheless, direct experimentation is needed to confirm this hypothesis, and other mechanisms may exist to regulate translation rates. One alternate hypothesis is that transcriptional efficiency is involved. However, differences between expressivity of genes in the same transcription unit correspond to variation of P2. This indicates that transcriptional efficiency is not involved.

DARWINIAN EVOLUTION AND mRNA TRANSLATION

Whatever the process, codon usage optimization implies the existence of strong evolutionary pressures. This point of view has been largely developed by Ikemura (9,10). His main idea is a balance between selection for optimal codons and the mutational process. When a gene does not have a high translation rate, selective pressure is weak and the mutational process may blur its effect. For highly expressed genes the pressure is stronger and optimization clearly occurs.

We first want to point out that codon usage bias is the clearest example known of overall optimization of gene sequences. Selective pressure does not

act on one particularly important codon, but on the relative frequency of each codon. This is an argument in favour of Darwinian evolution as a process of cumulative small variations. Although we have no means to measure the phenotypic effect of one silent nucleotide substitution, it would be surprising if the fitness were greatly affected. Direct competition experiments between strains varying in codon usage would be of great evolutionary interest.

Our second remark derives from comparisons among P2 index values. Table 2 in (2) indicates that weakly expressed genes are not free of constraints on C/U choice in codon position III but that the rule is opposite that for highly expressed genes. Ikemura's evolutionary scheme, wherein each gene independently evolves toward an optimum, does seem valid for tRNA considerations, but may not be true for C/U choice. Our study indicates that the selection target also includes harmonization of expressivity and C/U choice, particularly when the genes are in the same operon. This would explain the positions of unc genes in fig. 1. Although we do not find data on ATP-synthase (unc operon product) cell content, this enzyme is most probably not as abundant as r-proteins or elongation factors. Hence, the high use of optimal codons in unc3, uncA and uncD genes has to be explained by their expressivity relative to that of remaining genes in the unc operon, rather than by their absolute expressivity.

Finally, the relationship between codon usage and gene expressivity demonstrated in *E. coli* may be valid for eukaryotic organisms as well. Indeed, a similar correlation between codon usage, tRNA population and gene expressivity has been recently described in the eukaryotic, undifferentiated yeast cell (30). However, the yeast catalog of "optimal" codons is different from that in *E. coli* probably because anticodon sequences, codon recognition patterns and relative concentrations of iso-tRNA species differ widely between these two organisms.

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