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Bernard Henrissat, E. Raimbaud, V. Tran, J.P. Mornon. HCABAND : A computer program for the 2D-helical representation of protein sequences. *Computer Applications in the Biosciences*, 1990, 6 (1), pp.3-5. hal-02710324

HAL Id: hal-02710324

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02710324>

Submitted on 1 Jun 2020

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HCABAND: A computer program for the 2D-helical representation of protein sequences

B. Henrissat*, E. Raimbaud¹, V. Tran¹ and J.P. Mornon²

Abstract

A BASIC program, HCABAND, is described which is used to convert the linear amino acid sequence of proteins into a word processor-readable file to generate the 2D-helical representation required for hydrophobic cluster analysis. The user can specify the width of the plot and can use the word processor macro-commands to facilitate visual inspection of the plots. The plots can be easily stored on diskettes, mixed with text and printed. HCABAND features are generally applicable and can be implemented on virtually any microcomputer.

Introduction

With the advent of DNA sequencing, the amino acid sequences of a large number of proteins are now available. This has led to an increasing number of methods for sequence comparison and for secondary structure prediction (Schulz, 1988; Taylor, 1988; Thornton, 1988; Hodgman, 1989). One of the major goals of protein comparison is to determine whether two sequences are related and, consequently, whether they have a similar fold. Most classical methods are based on the maximization of alignment scores with various comparison matrices. However, these methods are not reliable when the amino acid identity is low (Lesk *et al.*, 1986; Barton and Sternberg, 1987). Hydrophobic cluster analysis (HCA) is a method to compare amino acid sequences (Gaboriaud *et al.*, 1987) which is derived from the theory of Lim (1974) and the representation of Schiffer and Edmundson (1967). HCA has proven to be able to detect topological similarities between proteins of low amino acid identity (Benchetrit *et al.*, 1988; Henrissat *et al.*, 1988, 1989). The method involves the drawing of the sequences on a theoretical α -helix where the hydrophobic residues form clusters. The shape, size, orientation and relative position of the clusters are then compared and sequence similarity, where it exists, may be readily revealed. One of the main advantages of HCA is that it allows distant information to become visible more readily than with methods which are based solely on

singlet amino acid property/identity. This communication describes a simple computer program which converts the amino acid sequence of a protein into the 2D-helical plot required for HCA.

System and methods

An IBM PC AT or compatible is required. The program was written with Microsoft GWBASIC V3.11 on a Tandon Target microcomputer but will run on any IBM PC or close compatible under MS DOS 2.0 or higher and GWBASIC or BASICA. It can be adapted to other computer systems with few modifications. HCA files can be printed under DOS command but are preferably processed through a word processor. Visual impression is enhanced if a line spacing < 0.5 can be defined. We routinely use Microsoft Word V3.20 and V4.00 which give satisfactory results. Other word processors that can read ASCII files should also work. HCA plots were printed on dot matrix (EPSON-FX) or laser (HP Laserjet; NEC LC 890 Postscript) printers through the commands of the word processor.

Algorithm

With the method developed by Mornon and co-workers (Gaboriaud *et al.*, 1987), the linear protein sequence is written on a helix smoothed on a cylinder. For such a graphical representation the two important parameters are NT and NR in the following relationship: after NT turns, residues i and $(i + NR)$ have similar positions parallel to the axis of the cylinder. In their plot, NT = 5 and NR = 18 and this describes a classical α -helix with 3.6 amino acids per turn.

Satisfactory plots can also be obtained for other pairs of NT and NR values, e.g. (4, 15) or (3, 11). The resulting helices have respectively 3.75 and 3.67 residues per turn which is close to the 'standard' value of 3.6. For reasons of convenience (Henrissat *et al.*, 1988), we have selected the pair with the lowest value of NT, e.g. NT = 3 and NR = 11. It must be noted that these values can be changed easily since they appear as parameters in the program.

The main feature of the algorithm is to convert an initial sequence (one line) into a two-dimensional array with the second dimension being the NR value (NR lines) (see Figure 1a). In order to position each symbol in the right line and column, we have created an intermediate table ID (ID[i], i varying from 1 to NR) which contains the position of the first symbol of the

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Step 2. word processing HCA files into HCA plots

Through the word processor's commands, the new files (with a .HCA suffix) can be loaded from the diskette and merged in order to avoid repetitive processing. A character font with fixed spacing is necessary. For a better visual appearance and to save space, line spacing should be reduced to ~0.25, 0.3, 0.4 and 0.5 line for character size of 6, 8, 10 or 12 respectively. Throughout the plot one can replace any amino acid with special properties by a dedicated ASCII character. For example, prolines are of special interest in hydrophobic cluster analysis since they are cluster breakers (Gaboriaud *et al.*, 1987). We found it convenient to replace all the prolines (P) in the plot by (■) which can be spotted more easily. This can be done automatically by the word processor. Similarly one can replace glycines (G) by (□), etc. To avoid interruption of clusters one can duplicate each band (Gaboriaud *et al.*, 1987). Numbering of the amino acids can be combined with text if needed. The HCA plot can then be saved on disk and printed. As an example, the HCA plots of sperm whale metmyoglobin and *Chironomus thummi* globin are presented in Figure 2. The 3D structures of these two proteins are similar although they display an amino acid conservation of ~22% (Bashford *et al.*, 1987). The similarity between the HCA plots is striking and allows straightforward alignment of their sequences.

Other HCA plot programs

HCABAND is an elementary program for use with the most simple and common microcomputers. HCA plot programs using graphical displays are currently being developed in the laboratory of J.P.M. For example, MACHCA operates from any Macintosh microcomputer and allows the automatic contouring of clusters. An IBM PC version of MACHCA is scheduled to take advantage of the graphical capabilities of these microcomputers. GKSHCA is a more sophisticated program to be used with any display or plotter compatible with the graphics library GKS; it produces compact coloured HCA plots with automatic clustering and several numerical predictions. A fully interactive software, MANSEK, derived from GKSHCA is under present development and will be described elsewhere.

MACHCA can be obtained from J.P.Mornon on request.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank S.Mortimer for his help with presentation in English.

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Received on May 9, 1989; accepted on August 28, 1989

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