

Original Research Paper

In silico study of the DNA sequences of the Coronavirus in several animal species and human.

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Abstract

Coronaviruses are positive-sense single-stranded RNA viruses, and their name derives from their crown-like appearance. In this study, we inventoried the animal species affected by Coronaviruses, and then we performed a comparative phylogenetic analysis based on DNA sequences among the different viral strains of Coronaviruses that have affected these animals as well as humans. To carry out this work, we used MEGA software version 11 to analyze the DNA sequences extracted from GenBank of the S gene. We classified the viral strains of this gene according to the infected animal species and the geographical area in which they were found. We worked on 33 nucleotide sequences of the S gene from different strains, such as SARS-CoV-2 and MERS-CoV affecting humans, Bat-CoV affecting bats, and PEDV and PDCoV affecting pigs, across several countries including China, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Japan, and Spain. We found that the S gene is characterized by an accumulation of mutations among the different strains, with certain nucleotide changes that may consequently be responsible for the transmission of the virus from animals to humans. Moreover, our results show that the S gene exhibits a very high genetic diversity among the Coronavirus strains, whether they infect animals or humans in different countries.

Keywords: Coronavirus, animals, humans, S gene, phylogeny.

الخلاصة

فيروسات كورونا هي فيروسات الحمض النووي الريبي أحادية السلسلة، واسمها يرجع إلى مظهر الإكليل الشمسي. قمنا في هذه الدراسة بحصر الأنواع الحيوانية المصابة بفيروس كورونا، ثم قمنا بإجراء مقارنة عن طريق تحليل التطور الوراثي بناءً على تسلسل الحمض النووي بين سلالات فيروس كورونا المختلفة التي أثرت على الحيوانات وكذلك البشر. لتنفيذ هذا العمل، استخدمنا الإصدار 11 من برنامج التحليل التطوري للوراثة الجزيئية لتحليل تسلسل الحمض النووي المستخرج من بنك الجينات لجين سبايك. وقمنا بتصنيف السلالات الفيروسية لهذا الجين حسب أنواع الحيوانات المصابة والمنطقة الجغرافية التي توجد فيها. لقد عملنا على 33 تسلسلاً من النيوكليوتيدات لجين سبايك من سلالات مختلفة، مثل السلالات التي تصيب البشر، والخفافيش، والخنازير، عبر عدة دول مثل الصين، والمملكة العربية السعودية، والولايات المتحدة، واليابان، وإسبانيا. ووجدنا أن هذا الجين يتميز بترام الطفرات بين السلالات المختلفة مع تغير معين في النيوكليوتيدات وبالتالي يمكن أن يكون سبباً في انتقال الفيروس من الحيوان إلى الإنسان. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تظهر نتائجنا أن جين سبايك يقدم تنوعاً جينياً عالياً جداً بين سلالات فيروس كورونا، سواء للسلالات التي تصيب الحيوانات أو تلك التي تصيب الإنسان في بلدان مختلفة.

الكلمات الرئيسية: فيروس كورونا، الحيوانات، الإنسان، جين سبايك، السلالات.

Introduction

It is now well established that the Coronavirus is one of the oldest, most famous, and widely spread viruses worldwide. It is considered the causative agent of various respiratory and digestive diseases. The Coronaviridae family comprises a group of 11 viruses that infect vertebrates (Siddell et al., 1983). According to the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses, Coronaviruses are classified under the order Nidovirales, family Coronaviridae, and subfamily Coronavirinae. Based on early serological evidence and subsequent genomic data, Coronavirinae is divided into four genera: *Alphacoronavirus*, *Betacoronavirus*, *Gammacoronavirus*, and *Deltacoronavirus* (Fung and Liu, 2019). Each genus is further divided into several viral strains, such as BCoV in cattle, CCoV in dogs, and IBV in birds (Alluwaimi et al., 2020).

In 2003, there were only 10 Coronaviruses with complete genomes available; subsequently, an additional 16 Coronaviruses with sequenced complete genomes were added.

These include two human Coronaviruses (human Coronavirus NL63, human Coronavirus HKU1), 10 other Coronaviruses from mammals (SARS Coronavirus from bats; Bat-CoV HKU2, Bat-CoV HKU4, Bat-CoV HKU5, Bat-CoV HKU8, Bat-CoV HKU9, Bat-CoV 512/2005, Bat-CoV 1A; equine Coronavirus; beluga Coronavirus), and four avian Coronaviruses (turkey Coronavirus, bulbul Coronavirus HKU11, thrush Coronavirus HKU12, munia Coronavirus HKU13) (Woo et al., 2012).

It seems that mutations in the S gene over time lead to the emergence of different viral strains affecting various species in diverse geographical areas. In this context, we focused on reconstructing evolutionary trees or phylogenies using a bioinformatics approach to trace the evolutionary history of mutations in the S protein genes of Coronaviruses in different animal species as well as in humans. This will allow us to understand the behavior of Coronaviruses and provide an estimate as close as possible to the structure of a phylogeny based on their distribution across countries and species.

Material and methods

DNA sequences were extracted from a molecular biology database known as GenBank to trace the phylogenetic tree and make comparisons between the DNA of several Coronavirus strains that have affected different animals as well as humans.

Data extraction from GenBank

All the DNA sequences studied in our work were downloaded from GenBank, which is a database constructed and distributed by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI). It is a collection of all publicly available nucleotide and protein sequences, along with bibliographic and biological annotations, accessible at the URL (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/genbank/>) (Sayers et al., 2020). These records are generated from direct communications with the original authors' DNA sequence databases, who provide their records to make the data available to everyone or as part of the publication process (Clark et al., 2016).

Phylogenetic analysis

For processing DNA sequences, there are several software programs available to generate phylogenetic trees, among which is the MEGA software that we have already used to study SARS-CoV-2 in other works (Derouiche et al., 2022; 2023). Molecular Evolutionary Genetics Analysis (MEGA) is a program that allows for the exploration and analysis of nucleotide and protein sequences (Tamura et al., 2011). We used MEGA version 11 to perform the phylogenetic analysis and obtain the phylogenetic trees (Kuhls and Mauricio, 2019) after several processing and analysis steps, which can be summarized as follows: inputting the DNA sequences in FASTA format; aligning these sequences using ClustalW; selecting the method for constructing the phylogenetic tree and adjusting the parameters of the chosen method. In our case, we used the UPGMA method (Unweighted Pair Group Method with Arithmetic Mean). This simple method allows for the transformation of a distance matrix (between different organisms, populations, or nucleotide sequences) into a rooted tree based on the similarities between pairs of sequences (Thompson et al., 1994).

Results and discussion

Results from GenBank

We analyzed over 1,273,329 DNA sequences from different Coronavirus strains published in GenBank, but we only selected the nucleotide sequences that include the Spike gene "S" (a structural gene) common to several infected animal species (Li, 2016). Among these sequences, we eliminated very short or repeated sequences; noting that there are multiple sequences presenting the same strain and country but of different sizes (nucleotide base pairs), we chose the sequence with the largest size. The 33 DNA sequences used in this study, representing viral strains of the Coronavirus classified according to the affected animal species across different countries as well as the strains that have infected humans, are listed in table I.

The phylogenetic tree (Figure 1) was constructed based on the S gene of different viral strains of the Coronavirus that have affected several animal species and humans, with sizes varying between 4374 bp and 1992 bp. According to the taxonomy of the Coronaviridae family, it is divided into four genera, which are represented in the phylogenetic tree obtained by four clades: *Alphacoronavirus*,

Deltacoronavirus, *Gammacoronavirus*, and *Betacoronavirus*. The clades *Alphacoronavirus* and *Betacoronavirus* are further divided into several sub-clades representing the lineages or viral strains.

Table I. Nucleotide sequences of different strains of Coronaviruses extracted from GenBank.

Animal	Species	Region	Virus	Size in bp	Locus	
Bat	<i>Tylosycteris pachypus</i>	China	Bat-CoV	4059	MW218379	
		Ethiopia	DcCoV	4101	MN514969	
Camel	<i>Camelus dromedarius</i>	Morocco	DcCoV	4092	MN514971	
		China	BCoV	4092	MN982181	
Bovine	Bovine	South Korea	BCoV	4092	HM573326	
		China	CCoV	4374	LC190907	
Dog	<i>Canis lupus familiaris</i>	China	CCoV	4374	LC190907	
Civet	<i>Civette palmiste</i>	China	SARS-CoV-1	4236	DQ514532	
	<i>Civette palmiste</i>	China	SARS-CoV-1	3768	AY627047	
Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>	USA	TCoV	3627	KF652218	
Guinea fowl	Guineafowl	France	GfCoV	3951	MG765535	
Ferret	<i>Melogale moschata</i>	China	FeCoV	4374	EF192156	
Human	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	France	HCoV-OC43	4077	KF963240	
	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Netherlands	HCoV-HKU1	4071	MN488637	
	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	China	HCoV-HKU1	4071	DQ437613	
	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Saudi Arabia	MERS-CoV	4062	KT806016	
	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	USA	SARS-CoV-2	3822	MZ027646	
	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Iran	SARS-CoV-2	3822	MW136267	
	<i>Homo sapiens</i>	Iran	SARS-CoV-2	3822	MW136267	
Pig	Pig	China	TGEV	4344	MH167923	
	Pig	Canada	PEDV	4271	KM189366	
	Pig	Mexico	PEDV	4200	KY828999	
	Pig	Japan	PEDV	4161	KY619734	
	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	China	PEDV	4161	MN508818	
	Pig	Thailand	PEDV	4161	KX981900	
	Pig	Vietnam	PEDV	4158	KX708901	
	Pig	Spain	PRCV	3678	M94097.1	
	Pig	China	PDCoV	3480	KX534090	
	Pig	USA	PDCoV	3483	KP995356	
	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Mexico	PDCoV	3483	MK478381	
	Yak	Yak	China	YakCoV	4092	MH810162
	Chicken	Chicken	China	PDCoV	3480	MK248485
Rat	<i>Bandicota savilei</i>	Laos	RtBs-CoV	3435	MT085176	
Cat	<i>Felis catus</i>	China	FCoV	4359	MK987175	
	Domestic cat	China	FCoV	1992	MT181985	

Phylogenetic relationships within the S gene tree

Our phylogenetic tree consists of four groups: *Alphacoronavirus*, *Betacoronavirus*, *Gammacoronavirus*, and *Deltacoronavirus*, which contain various viral strains that infect different animal species. According to Woo et al. (2012), *Alphacoronaviruses* and *Betacoronaviruses* only infect mammals, while *Gammacoronaviruses* and *Deltacoronaviruses* infect birds, although some of them can also infect mammals.

Cowley et al. (2011) published that the canine Coronavirus (CCoV), which infects dogs, is closely related to the transmissible gastroenteritis virus (TGEV) of pigs, the ferret Coronavirus, and the feline Coronavirus (FCoV). In our tree, the three Coronaviruses from China, namely CCoV, FCoV, and FeCoV, which infect the dog, cat, and ferret respectively, as well as PRCV from Spain and TGEV from China, which infect the pig, are all grouped together in the same Alpha subgroup (α). The position of the two strains CCoV (HCM47/2015) and FeCoV (DM95/2003) on the same branch is explained by the work of Dung et al. (2017), where they found through phylogenetic analysis of the complete S gene that CoV/HCM47/2015 from China was similar to CoV/DM95/2003, sharing 95.9% similarity. Additionally, according to Yuan et al. (2018), the porcine respiratory Coronavirus (PRCV) is a

respiratory variant of TGEV, with the S protein coded by PRCV lacking about 200 amino acids in the N-terminal region that contain determinants related to the enteropathogenicity of TGEV. Therefore, the TGEV strain from China and PRCV from Spain are in the same branch.

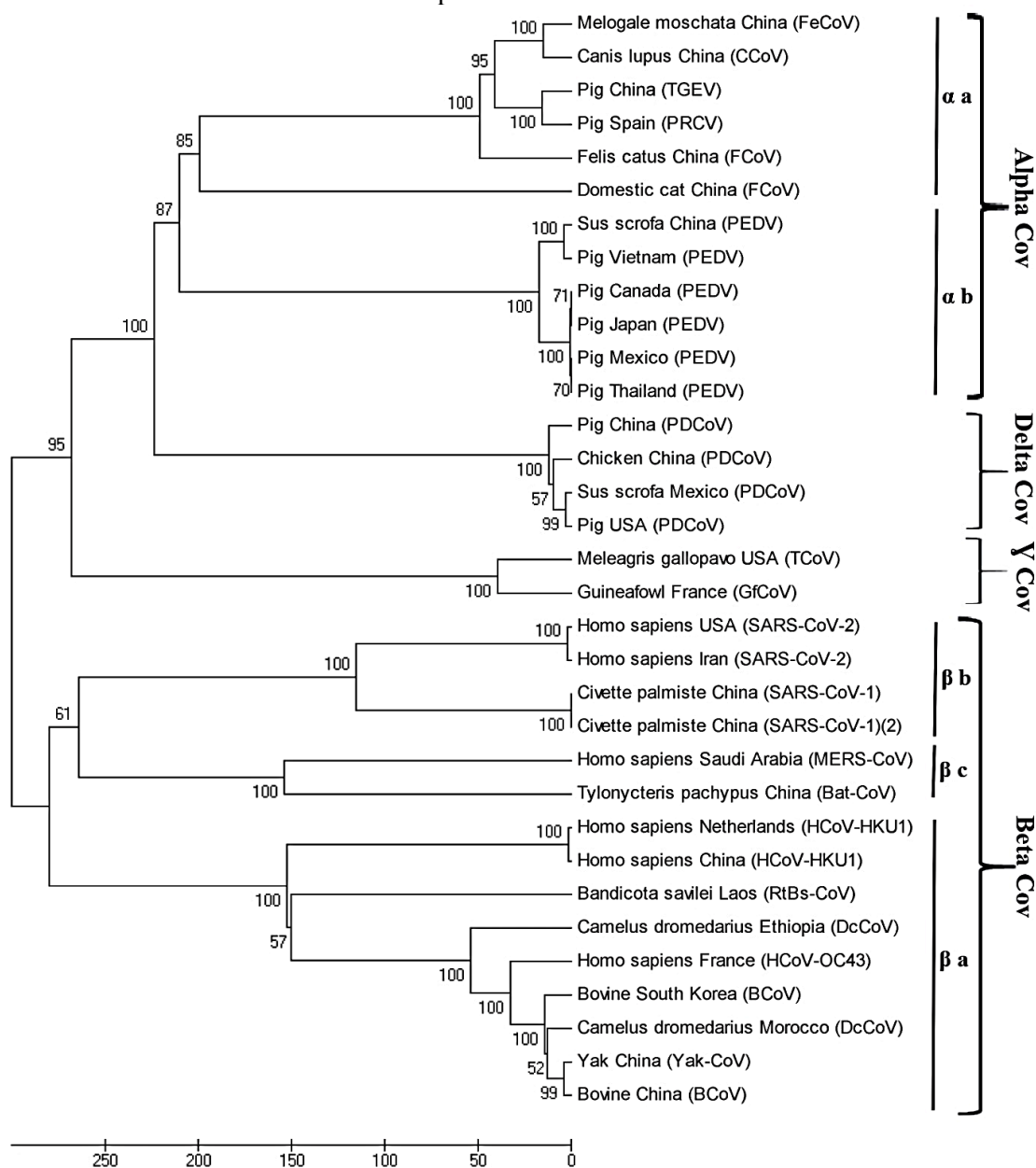


Fig. 1. Phylogenetic tree of the S gene representing different strains of Coronaviruses.

Within our phylogenetic tree, the PEDVs from Japan (14JM-01), Canada (ON-007), Thailand (P1915-NPF-071511A), Mexico (PEDV/MEX/MICH/01/2013), China (SHpd/2012), and Vietnam (HUA-PED88), which infect pigs, belong to the same subgroup (αb). Nguyen et al. (2018) demonstrated that the strain from Japan (14JM-01) is a North American strain with 100% identity in the nucleotide sequence of the S gene with the Canadian strain (ON-007). They also noted that the strain P1915-NPF-071511A is the first strain of the emergence of an American-type PEDV in Thailand, with the S gene sequence sharing 100% similarity with American strains KUIDL-PED-2014-002 and USA/Ohio60/2013, which share 99.81% similarity with the strain from Mexico (PEDV/MEX/MICH/01/2013). These findings confirm our results for the four previous strains that were in the same branch. Meanwhile, Than et al. (2020) showed that the HUA-PED88 strain from Vietnam (2015) is genetically related to the circulating PEDV strains in China (SHpd/2012).

According to the work of Qingqing et al. (2019), potential interspecies transmission of PDCoV may exist between domestic pigs and birds, indicating that the pig Coronavirus PDCoV CH/GD03/2015 infected chickens (PDCoV CC-HNZK), and that PDCoV CC-HNZK-02 exhibited two mutations in the S gene: Asp became His at position 138, and Gln was replaced by Lys at position 641, which explains the close position of PDCoV CC-HNZK to PDCoV CH/GD03/2015 in our tree. Additionally, Pérez et al. (2019) noted that the Mexican PDCoV strain is phylogenetically closer to PDCoV strains reported in the United States, with an analysis of S gene sequences obtained from Mexican isolates sharing 99.6% nucleotide identity with North American strains.

The GfCoV/FR/2011 Coronavirus from France and the TCoV from the USA are in the same branch. According to Bouwman et al. (2019), the Guinea fowl Coronavirus GfCoV/FR/2011 from France is closely associated with the TCoV from India (IN/421/10), showing a similarity of 86.44%.

SARS-CoV-2, first reported in China in December 2019, quickly became a pandemic with devastating effects (Chen et al., 2020). According to Manuel and Cardozo (2020), the variant carrying the D614G Spike mutation, which is the transition from aspartate (D) at position 614 frequently found in Chinese strains to glycine (G), was spread worldwide by travelers; Korber et al. (2020) suggested that these G614 variants were likely introduced and reintroduced in different locations. The Asian outbreak was predominantly D614 until February. By early April 2020, G614 had become the dominant form of the pandemic, which explains the position of the strains SARS-CoV-2/human/IRN/K1r-112/2020 from Iran and SARS-CoV-2/human/USA/TG701123/2020 from the United States in the same branching, as both collected after April 2020 contain the G614 mutation.

The two SARSr-CoV-1 strains from civets in China are in the same branch and share 99.42% similarity. According to Guan et al. (2003), after the emergence of severe acute respiratory syndrome human Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in southern China in 2002/2003, SARS-Like (SARSr-CoV-1) strains carried by palm civets from live animal markets in Guangdong were found, with their genomic sequences showing 99.8% identity with that of human SARS-CoV. They were considered an intermediate host that facilitated the passage of the virus to humans.

According to Guangwen et al. (2013), MERS-CoV belongs to lineage C of *Betacoronaviruses*, being closely related to *Tylonycteris* Bat-CoV HKU4 (Ty-Bat-CoV HKU4) in the S gene (66.8% to 67.4%). Viral gene fragments that are identical or closely similar to those of MERS-CoV have also been recovered from bats, raising again the possibility that bats act as a natural reservoir for MERS-CoV. Chen et al. (2015) state that most of the recombination and sequence diversity is found in the S gene, and these changes can affect the structural conformation of the receptor-binding domain (RBD) (with positively selected sites located in the RBD of the S protein). The RBD shows two regions: a binding region and a central region, both crucial for the virus to recognize and enter host cells and interact with related human receptors; MERS-CoV uses the DPP4 receptor to penetrate host cells. Mutations have been observed at two sites in the RBD binding region, suggesting that amino acid substitutions could enhance MERS-CoV's ability to bind to different host cells and thus facilitate its transmission between species (Zhang et al., 2016). The strong similarities between the DPP4 receptors of humans, camels, horses, and bats allow MERS-CoV to infect them (Folegatti et al., 2020). This justifies the position of MERS-CoV strains from Saudi Arabia and *Tylonycteris* Bat-CoV HKU4 from China (Macao) in the same branch of our tree.

So et al. (2019) noted that the DcCoV-HKU23 from Morocco, which affected camels, differed from BCoV that infected cattle by a range of 0.0249 to 0.0300 substitutions per site, and from HCoV-OC43 of humans by a range of 0.0445 to 0.0468 substitutions per site. Similarly, the species most closely related to HCoV-OC43 remains BCoV rather than DcCoV-HKU23, knowing that BCoV and HCoV-OC43 share an overall nucleotide identity of 96% in their S gene. These data justify the position of the BCoV strain from South Korea, which is closest to the human species strain OC43 (HCoV-OC43) from France in our tree. The results of So et al. (2019) highlighted active recombination of Coronaviruses circulating in dromedaries and are also relevant to the emergence and evolution of other *Betacoronaviruses*, which explains the position of DcCoV from *Camelus dromedarius* in Ethiopia and Morocco in our tree. The same phenomenon explains the position of BCoV from South Korea and China.

The work of Kin et al. (2016) on the genetic comparison of BCoV and HCoV-OC43 reveals that HCoV-OC43 results from zoonotic transmission from cattle to humans, as these two viruses are extremely close in terms of genetic and epidemiological characteristics.

Conclusion

The significance of our study is based on the links between Coronavirus strains in different geographical areas; we utilized phylogeny, a useful method in population genetics and epidemiology. It is an essential component in biology for studying the relationships and evolutionary history of organisms, as well as their molecular and morphological diversification. For this work, we used a bioinformatics tool for phylogenetic analysis and the construction of the phylogenetic tree, specifically the MEGA 11 software. The analyses were applied to 33 sequences of the S gene to classify the viral strains of Coronavirus from each genus according to the affected species and the geographical areas where they were found. The results demonstrated that the DNA sequences of the spike protein gene S are divided into four groups represented by four different clades: *Alphacoronavirus*, *Betacoronavirus*, *Gammacoronavirus*, and *Deltacoronavirus*. The significant number of animals infected by this virus, as well as humans, is due to a high genetic diversity among Coronavirus strains, which reflects the instability of the S gene, expressed by its very high mutation rate.

Author's Contributions

Author 1: Data analysis, drafting the article.

Author 2: Data analysis.

Author 3: Data analysis.

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