Sequence analysis of SARS-CoV-2 genome reveals features important for vaccine design

Jacob Kames[1], David D. Holcomb[1], Ofer Kimchi[2], Michael DiCuccio[3], Nobuko Hamasaki-Katagiri [1], Tony Wang[4], Anton A. Komar[5], Aikaterini Alexaki[1,*] and Chava Kimchi-Sarfaty[1,*]

[1] Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, Office of Tissues and Advanced Therapies, Division of Plasma Protein Therapeutics, Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, MD, USA

[2] Harvard University School of Engineering and Applied Sciences

[3] National Center of Biotechnology Information, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA

[4] Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, Office of Vaccines Research and Review, Division of Viral Products, Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, MD, USA

[5] Center for Gene Regulation in Health and Disease, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, USA

Corresponding authors:

[*]Chava Kimchi-Sarfaty, Ph.D.; Tel: +1 240 402-8203; Chava.kimchi-sarfaty@fda.hhs.gov; Division of Plasma Protein Therapeutics, Office of Tissue and Advanced Therapies, Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, USA

Correspondence may also be addressed to,

[*]Aikaterini Alexaki, Ph.D.; Tel: +1 240 402 7072; Aikaterini.alexaki@fda.hhs.gov; Division of Plasma Protein Therapeutics, Office of Tissue and Advanced Therapies, Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, Food and Drug Administration, Silver Spring, USA

Abstract

As the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is rapidly progressing, the need for the development of an effective vaccine is critical. A promising approach for vaccine development is to generate, through codon pair deoptimization, an attenuated virus. This approach carries the advantage that it only requires limited knowledge specific to the virus in question, other than its genome sequence. Therefore, it is well suited for emerging viruses for which we may not have extensive data. We performed comprehensive *in silico* analyses of several features of SARS-CoV-2 genomic sequence (e.g., codon usage, codon pair usage, dinucleotide/junction dinucleotide usage, RNA structure around the frameshift region) in comparison with other members of the coronaviridae family of viruses, the overall human genome, and the transcriptome of specific human tissues such as lung, which are primarily targeted by the virus. Our analysis identified the spike (S) and nucleocapsid (N) proteins as promising targets for deoptimization and suggests a roadmap for SARS-CoV-2 vaccine development, which can be generalizable to other viruses.

Introduction

The recent emergence of the 2019 novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has gained worldwide attention and sparked an international effort to develop treatments and a vaccine. To date, there have been 693,224 confirmed cases and 33,106 deaths from COVID-19 worldwide, with 136 countries implementing additional health measures[1]. Given the urgency to combat this emerging disease, multiple efforts to develop an effective vaccine are underway. A relatively recent approach for vaccine development, first proposed by Coleman et al. in 2008 for the attenuation of poliovirus[2], has been used for the attenuation of dozens of viruses, and more recently for bacteria[3]. This approach accomplishes viral attenuation through codon pair deoptimization and appears to be promising for vaccine development, particularly against emerging viruses, as it does not require extensive virus-specific knowledge. It does, however, require knowledge of the viral genome sequence and extensive characterization of its codon and codon pair usage characteristics.

Codon usage is biased across all domains of life, i.e., synonymous codons occur at different frequencies in different organisms[4,5]. It is thought that preferred codons correspond to more abundant tRNAs, and therefore, are translated more efficiently[6]. Similarly, there is bias in codon pair usage, with certain codon pairs occurring at a much different frequency than would be expected based on the codon usage[5]. Codon pair usage also appears to affect translation efficiency[6], although the mechanism is not entirely clear, and it has been argued that dinucleotide usage may be the driving force in determining viral sequence fitness, while codon pair bias may be a secondary effect of altered dinucleotide frequency[7]. Considering that viruses are obligate intracellular parasites and rely on the host-cell machinery for proper expression of their genes, it is worth noting that their codon usage often does not closely resemble the codon usage of their hosts[8,9], a phenomenon that is not well understood. In this regard, a thorough characterization of codon, codon pair and dinucleotide usage of SARS-CoV-2 can provide useful information regarding expression potential of the viral genes and the fitness of the virus in its human or other hosts. Furthermore, it has been shown that viral attenuation can be achieved through extensive changes in codon pair usage of viral genes[2]. Since the mechanism of viral attenuation through codon pair deoptimization is not entirely clear, this in-depth analysis is necessary to guide the development of new vaccines.

Coronaviruses (CoVs) are enveloped, positive-stranded RNA viruses with a large genome of about 30 kb encoding multiple proteins[10]. Translation of a positive-stranded RNA from the initial infectious virus particles generates (among other proteins) a virally encoded RNA dependent RNA polymerase (replicase). This replicase is necessary for viral replication and subsequent generation of

viral subgenomic RNAs (sgRNAs), from which the synthesis of structural and accessory proteins occurs[10]. ORF1ab, which encodes the replicase polyprotein (among other proteins) occupies about two thirds of the 5' prime end of this genome[10,11]. A -1 programmed ribosomal frameshift (PRF) occurs half-way through ORF1ab, allowing the translation of ORF1b[10]. The efficiency of the frameshift thus modulates the relative ratios of proteins encoded by ORF1b and the upstream ORF1a and is critical for coronavirus propagation. Frameshift efficiency (ranging from 15 to 60%) in -1 PRFs is commonly regulated by pseudoknotted mRNA structures following the frameshift, and the conservation of a three-stem pseudoknot in coronaviruses has been previously characterized[12]. Following ORF1ab, are the spike (S), ORF3a, envelope (E), membrane (M), ORF6, ORF7a, ORF7b, ORF8, nucleocapsid (N) and ORF10 genes. S, E, M and N are the structural proteins of the virus[11]. S promotes attachment and fusion to the host cell, during infection[13]. In the case of SARS-CoV-2, S binds to the human angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2)[11,14,15]. The E protein is an ion channel and regulates virion assembly[16]. The M protein also participates in virus assembly and in the biosynthesis of new virus particles[17], while the N protein forms the ribonucleoprotein complex with the virus RNA[18] and has several functions, such as enhancing transcription of the viral genome and interacting with the viral membrane protein during virion assembly[19]. Many of the other ORFs have unknown functions or are not well characterized[20], as their presence is not consistent across all coronaviruses.

We have conducted a thorough analysis of the codon, codon pair and dinucleotide usage of the SARS-CoV-2 and have assessed how it relates to other coronaviruses, its hosts, and to the tissues that SARS-CoV-2 has been reported to infect[21-23]. We have taken advantage of our recently published databases, which include genomic codon usage statistics for all species with available sequence data, and transcriptomic codon usage statistics from several human tissues[4,5,24]. We further analyzed each viral gene in terms of its codon characteristics and used an array of codon usage metrics that informed us of the potential of each gene sequence to contribute to the deoptimization of the virus. In the case of ORF1ab, we further examined the structure of the mRNA in the region following the frameshift, finding the SARS-CoV-2 mRNA to exhibit a similar pseudoknotted structure to known coronaviruses. We identified two viral genes that represent valuable targets for deoptimization to generate an attenuated virus. Our analysis can be used as a pipeline to guide codon pair deoptimization for viral attenuation and vaccine development or *a posteriori* to evaluate the effectiveness of an attenuated viral sequence.

Results

SARS-CoV-2 proximity to coronaviruses, host genomes and tissue transcriptomes

Since the end of last year when it first emerged, SARS-CoV-2 has been mutating and spreading around the world. Ninety-seven complete or near-complete SARS-CoV-2 genomes are currently accessible in GenBank, with various mutations. To determine which SARS-CoV-2 sequence was most appropriate to use, we retrieved all the published sequences of the virus available in GenBank; after excluding incomplete and low-quality sequences, we calculated the percent difference in codon usage between these and the reference sequence. The average percent difference in codon usage was 0.029%, or ~3 codons / 10,000, clearly showing that variation in sequences is not significantly affecting overall codon usage. This degree of mutation between strains is corroborated by a recently published study[25].

We next examined how the SARS-CoV-2 codon pair usage compares with other coronaviruses and to its current host. Codon pair data inherently contain the codon usage data and therefore are better suited than codon usage data for this type of comparison. As expected, SARS-CoV-2 codon pair usage closely resembles the codon usage of the coronoviridae family, while it is quite distinct from the codon pair usage of the human genome (Table 1). Bat (*Chiroptera*) and pangolin (*Pholidota*) from which the virus may have been transmitted to humans, as well as dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*) to which the virus is feared may be transmitted next, were included in the analysis. We find that these species have a similar codon usage when compared with human; therefore, viral tropism cannot be inferred based on codon usage data alone (Table 1). Since SARS-CoV-2 infects bronchial epithelial cells and type II pneumocytes and our recent findings show that transcriptomic tissue-specific codon pair usage can vary greatly from genomic codon pair usage[24], we also examined the transcriptomic codon pair usage of the lung and how it compares with the SARS-CoV-2 codon pair usage. Rather surprisingly, the codon usage in the lung was more distinct from SARS-CoV-2 codon usage than the *Homo sapiens* genomic codon usage. The transcriptome codon pair usage of kidney and small intestine, tissues that are also susceptible to the infection, are similarly distant from SARS-CoV-2 (Table 1).

Codon, codon pair and dinucleotide usage of SARS-CoV-2

To inspect the sequence features of SARS-CoV-2 in more detail, we plotted its codon usage per amino acid and compared it with the human genome and lung transcriptome (Figure 1). SARS-CoV-2 clearly exhibits a preference in codons ending in T and A (71.7%), which is not observed in the human genome (44.9% ending in T or A) and lung transcriptome (37.6% ending in T or A). Similarly, the kidney and small

intestine transcriptome show a preference for codons ending in C and G (62.5% in the kidney and 61.8% in the small intestine, Supplemental Figure 1). The codon pair usage of SARS-CoV-2 was also examined in juxtaposition with the human codon usage (Figure 2A and 2B). The differences in codon usage of the two genomes are highlighted in Figure 2C.

Since the mechanism of viral attenuation through codon pair deoptimization is not entirely clear, and it has been argued that it is an indirect result of increased CpG content, we further investigated the dinucleotide and junction dinucleotide profile of the SARS-CoV-2 as it compares with *Homo sapiens* genome and lung transcriptome (Figure 3). Clearly, CpG dinucleotides are avoided in the SARS-CoV-2 genome, and to a lesser extent CC and GG dinucleotides are too. This provides an opportunity to increase immunogenicity of a potential attenuated virus vaccine by increasing its CpG content.

RNA folding

The genome sequence determines not only the amino acid sequence, but also the structure of the mRNA. The mRNA structure following the frameshift site is expected to be especially biologically relevant, as pseudoknots following programmed ribosomal frameshifts have been found to regulate the efficiency of the frameshift[26,27]. We therefore sought to study the similarity of the SARS-CoV-2 mRNA structure compared with the structures of different coronavirus mRNAs in the region following the ORF1ab frameshift.

RNA structures were predicted using two distinct secondary structure prediction algorithms[28-30]. Of the top 10 coronaviruses whose predicted minimum free energy (MFE) structures best aligned to that of SARS-CoV-2, seven matched among the two algorithms, showing a high degree of agreement among the two sets of structure predictions. Those seven consensus best-aligned structures are shown, alongside the novel coronavirus post-frameshift structure, in Figure 4 A-H. The similarity of two of these structures to SARS-CoV-2 can be explained by a high degree of sequence similarity to the SARS-CoV-2 mRNA (a SARS-related coronavirus and a bat coronavirus, shown in Figure 4 B-C. However, the other five —all belonging to avian coronaviruses, which are part of the group of the so-called gammacoronaviruses, causing highly contagious diseases of chickens, turkey and other birds —were not in the top 10 sequences most closely aligned to the SARS-CoV-2 mRNA on the basis of sequence. Of note, in the 97 SARS-CoV-2 sequences found in GenBank, no mutations were found in the sequences around the frameshift site (+/- 200 nts) further highlighting the functional importance of this region.

Finally, we used our recently published RNA landscape enumeration algorithm[29] to study the RNA folding beyond the MFE structures. We find that even those coronaviruses whose MFE structure does not contain a pseudoknot will fold into a pseudoknot in a relatively high fraction of cases, and that most coronaviruses have a relatively high probability of the initial stem following the frameshift folding into part of a 3-stem pseudoknot like the one exhibited by the SARS-CoV-2 MFE structure (Figure 4 I).

Viral gene codon usage properties

We next sought to examine each viral gene separately in terms of their codon and codon pair usage. Relative synonymous codon usage (RSCU) and codon pair score (CPS) are commonly used metrics to describe the codon and codon pair usage bias, respectively. RSCU expresses the observed over expected synonymous codon usage ratio, while CPS is the natural log of the observed over expected synonymous codon pair ratio using observed individual codon usage[2,31]. In our analyses, RSCU and CPS are derived from human genomic codon and codon pair usage frequencies. For ease of comparison, we used ln(RSCU) to measure the codon usage bias. The average CPS across a gene is referred to as codon pair bias (CPB) of the gene[2]. The average ln(RSCU) and CPB of each viral gene was calculated and compared with host genes average ln(RSCU) and CPB (Figure 5). The average RSCU, ln(RSCU) and CPB of each viral gene appear in Table 2. ORF10 was strikingly the least similar gene to the human genome in terms of both its codon and codon pair usage, followed by the E gene. These genes provide little opportunity for deoptimization, since their sequence is already far from optimal. On the other hand, genes S and N are more similar to human in terms of their codon pair usage. To explore further the potential for codon pair deoptimization, we plotted their CPS across their sequence (Supplemental Figure 2 and Figure 6). As seen in these figures all viral genes use mostly rare codons (ln(RSCU) <0); however, it is striking that ORF6 and ORF10 use almost exclusively rare codons, while ORF3a and M and ORF10 have some of the lowest ln(RSCU) values. Regarding codon pair usage, S stands out as the gene that uses frequent codon pairs more often (peaks with relatively high CPS scores), while N, ORF6 and ORF7b are genes that do not use very rare codon pairs (CPS values are only moderately negative).

Discussion

We performed a comprehensive characterization of the codon, codon pair and dinucleotide usage of the SARS-CoV-2 genome with the intention to identify the best targets for codon pair deoptimization in order to design an attenuated virus for vaccine development. Genes N and S were singled out as the best potential targets for deoptimization, due to the relatively high CPB among the viral genes.

Furthermore, they are structural proteins with known functions. Therefore, it will be possible to study the results of codon pair deoptimization on the fitness of the virus.

Currently most published attempts of viral attenuation through codon pair deoptimization do not discuss the strategy for selecting which genes to deoptimize. Although codon pair deoptimization has been proven successful for viral attenuation[2,32,33], the mechanism is not clear. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that for every successful published deoptimization attempt, there may be several unsuccessful and therefore unpublished ones. Similarly, there have been successful attempts to generate attenuated viruses through codon deoptimization[34-37]. Understanding the mechanism that leads to viral attenuation requires a thorough characterization of the viral sequence and of the consequences of sequence changes. There are several factors that may contribute to the efficacy of deoptimization strategies. In changing the codon pair usage, the dinucleotide frequency and the GC content are altered; mRNA secondary structure and translational kinetics are also perturbed. Further, the CpG content is changing, leading potentially to altered immunogenicity. It is likely that codon pair (or codon) deoptimization leads to reduced expression, either due to changes in transcription, mRNA stability, or translation efficiency[38]. Alternatively, it is possible that deoptimization may lead to perturbed cotranslational folding[39], resulting in altered protein conformation. In the case of the S protein, this may lead to decreased binding affinity for the ACE2 protein, thus affecting viral fitness.

A number of parameters were considered in determining which proteins could be targets for codon pair deoptimization. It has been shown that deoptimizing one third or less of the virus is sufficient to attenuate the virus, and more extensive deoptimization may lead to a completely inactive virus[40]. ORF1ab takes up about two thirds of the virus; therefore, its size may make it an unsuitable target. Furthermore, altering its RNA sequence is likely to disturb the pseudoknot that is responsible for frameshifting. Since we have identified the sequence that is responsible for the frameshift, a partial codon pair deoptimization is possible. However, ORF1ab is essential for genome replication, which also does not support its capacity as a codon deoptimization target.

ORF10 has strikingly low CPB and RSCU given that it is at the very end of the viral genome there may be a structural reason for its nucleotide sequence. The E gene also has a very low CPB; interestingly, although ORF10 has both positive and negative CPS across its sequence, E has mostly negative CPSs, which make it unsuited for codon pair deoptimization. ORF7a is unusual, as it has the highest RSCU of the viral genes, but a rather low CPB (it uses preferred codons in unusual combinations). Although ORF7a is not the most compelling target for codon pair deoptimization, if a codon deoptimization

strategy is attempted, this gene should be considered. It should, however, be noted that since it overlaps for a few nucleotides with ORF7b, any sequence changes should be considered in coordination for both genes.

Our sequence analysis pointed to the S and N genes as potential targets for codon pair deoptimization. The S protein, which binds to the cell-surface receptor and induces virus-cell membrane fusion, has the highest CPB score of all viral proteins, leading to significant flexibility for codon pair deoptimization. Since it is a surface protein, it is under constant pressure to avoid the immune response, and as a result, it is the least conserved of the coronavirus proteins, diverging both in its amino acid and its codon usage[25]. Being under constant selective pressure could be the reason why it has been able to adapt to the host genome more than other proteins. The N protein forms the ribonucleoprotein complex with the virus RNA. In contrast to S, the N protein is the most conserved and stable protein among the coronavirus structural proteins. It uses mostly codon pairs with intermediate frequency; thus, it could be substantially codon pair deoptimized.

Our thorough codon/codon pair characterization of the SARS-CoV-2 genome has led to the identification of S and N as potential targets for codon pair deoptimization. The next obvious step is to construct the deoptimized virus and test its infectivity and ability to replicate. While testing the fitness of the virus, the strategy of selecting targets would also be tested, which could lead to better understanding of the factors that make codon pair deoptimization successful in generating attenuated viruses. The risk of a new emerging virus is always present, and this has been poignantly highlighted by the current SARS-CoV-2. The current work could be used for the quick generation of a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine but also as a pipeline to facilitate vaccine development when the next virus is presented.

Materials and Methods

Sequence Accession and Codon Comparison

The complete reference sequences for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2 , accession NC_045512.2) was downloaded from NCBI RefSeq[41] on March 13, 2020. CDS sequences from 97 complete SARS-CoV-2 isolates were downloaded using NCBI Batch Entrez on March 25, 2020. Sequences of poor quality or with CDS lengths that did not match those of the reference sequence due to deletion or insertion were removed, leaving 87 sequences. To calculate percent difference in codon usage, each CDS of the 87 sequences was compared at the codon level to that of the reference

sequence. Codons containing nucleotides where a base call could not be made ("N") were removed from the calculation. All scripts for this calculation were written in Python 3.7.4.

Comparison of Codon and Codon Pair Usage in Host Species

Codon, codon pair and dinucleotide usage data for *Homo sapiens*, *Canis lupus familiaris*, *Chiroptera* (bats) and *Pholidota* (pangolins) were downloaded from the CoCoPUTs database[5] on March 13, 2020. Likewise, human lung, kidney (cortex) and small intestine (terminal ileum) tissue-specific codon, codon pair and dinucleotide usage data were accessed from the TissueCoCoPUTs database[24] on March 13, 2020. Codon, codon pair and dinucleotide usage data for SARS-CoV-2 was calculated from the reference sequence (accession NC_045512.2) using scripts written in Python 3.7.4. Euclidean distances between codon pair usage frequencies were calculated using the *dist* function from the *stats* package in R 3.6.1.

RSCU, CPS and CPB

RSCU was calculated as defined in Sharp *et al*.[31] based on *Homo sapiens* genomic codon usage data accessed from the CoCoPUTs database[5] on March 13, 2020. Codon pair scores (CPS) for all 4096 codon pairs were calculated as described in Coleman *et al*[2] using *Homo sapiens* genomic codon pair usage data accessed from the CoCoPUTs database[5] on March 13, 2020. Codon pair bias (CPB) of a gene is the arithmetic mean of all CPSs throughout the gene, as defined in Coleman *et al[2]*.

RNA folding

To ensure our results are robust to the prediction algorithm chosen as well as to the size of the window examined, we used two secondary structure prediction algorithms on two window sizes. We used NuPack to predict the minimum free energy (MFE) secondary structure on the 100 nucleotides (nts) following the frameshift, and our own recently published free energy landscape enumeration algorithm to examine the full structure landscape of the 75 nts following the frameshift[28,29]. For the latter, we employed the heuristic that the minimum stem length was set to 4. Aside from this heuristic, the two algorithms differ primarily in the loop entropy calculation, which especially affects the probability of pseudoknot formation.

Sequence alignment was measured using MatLab's Needleman-Wunsch sequence alignment implemented on the 100 nts following the frameshift using default parameters. The parameters employed were the defaults: the NUC44 scoring matrix and a gap penalty of 8 for all gaps.

Structure alignment was measured using a method similar to our previously-studied "per-base topology" score[29]. Taking the dot-bracket representation of each secondary structure, we summed the number of positions containing identical elements. Employing an alignment model allowing for gaps, with a gap penalty and a misalignment penalty of -1, did not change our results[42].

References

1 Organization, W. H. *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report – 70*, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200330-sitrep-70-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=7e0fe3f8_2> (2020).

2 Coleman, J. R. *et al.* Virus attenuation by genome-scale changes in codon pair bias. *Science* **320**, 1784-1787, doi:10.1126/science.1155761 (2008).

3 Coleman, J. R., Papamichail, D., Yano, M., Garcia-Suarez Mdel, M. & Pirofski, L. A. Designed reduction of Streptococcus pneumoniae pathogenicity via synthetic changes in virulence factor codon-pair bias. *J Infect Dis* **203**, 1264-1273, doi:10.1093/infdis/jir010 (2011).

4 Athey, J. *et al.* A new and updated resource for codon usage tables. *BMC Bioinformatics* **18**, 391, doi:10.1186/s12859-017-1793-7 (2017).

5 Alexaki, A. *et al.* Codon and Codon-Pair Usage Tables (CoCoPUTs): Facilitating Genetic Variation Analyses and Recombinant Gene Design. *J Mol Biol* **431**, 2434-2441, doi:10.1016/j.jmb.2019.04.021 (2019).

6 Komar, A. A. The Yin and Yang of codon usage. *Hum Mol Genet* **25**, R77-R85, doi:10.1093/hmg/ddw207 (2016).

7 Kunec, D. & Osterrieder, N. Codon Pair Bias Is a Direct Consequence of Dinucleotide Bias. *Cell Rep* **14**, 55-67, doi:10.1016/j.celrep.2015.12.011 (2016).

8 Holcomb, D. D., Alexaki, A., Katneni, U. & Kimchi-Sarfaty, C. The Kazusa codon usage database, CoCoPUTs, and the value of up-to-date codon usage statistics. *Infect Genet Evol* **73**, 266-268, doi:10.1016/j.meegid.2019.05.010 (2019).

9 Rahman, S. U., Yao, X., Li, X., Chen, D. & Tao, S. Analysis of codon usage bias of Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus and its adaptation to hosts. *Infect Genet Evol* **58**, 1-16, doi:10.1016/j.meegid.2017.11.027 (2018).

10 Lim, Y. X., Ng, Y. L., Tam, J. P. & Liu, D. X. Human Coronaviruses: A Review of Virus-Host Interactions. *Diseases* **4**, doi:10.3390/diseases4030026 (2016).

11 Guo, Y. R. *et al.* The origin, transmission and clinical therapies on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak - an update on the status. *Mil Med Res* **7**, 11, doi:10.1186/s40779-020-00240-0 (2020).

12 Plant, E. P. *et al.* A three-stemmed mRNA pseudoknot in the SARS coronavirus frameshift signal. *PLoS Biol* **3**, e172, doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.0030172 (2005).

13 Belouzard, S., Millet, J. K., Licitra, B. N. & Whittaker, G. R. Mechanisms of coronavirus cell entry mediated by the viral spike protein. *Viruses* **4**, 1011-1033, doi:10.3390/v4061011 (2012).

14 Jia, H. P. *et al.* ACE2 receptor expression and severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus infection depend on differentiation of human airway epithelia. *J Virol* **79**, 14614-14621, doi:10.1128/JVI.79.23.14614-14621.2005 (2005).

15 Lu, R. *et al.* Genomic characterisation and epidemiology of 2019 novel coronavirus: implications for virus origins and receptor binding. *Lancet* **395**, 565-574, doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30251-8 (2020).

16 Ruch, T. R. & Machamer, C. E. The coronavirus E protein: assembly and beyond. *Viruses* **4**, 363-382, doi:10.3390/v4030363 (2012).
17 Neuman, B. W. *et al.* A structural analysis of M protein in coronavirus assembly and morphology. *J Struct Biol* **174**, 11-22, doi:10.1016/j.jsb.2010.11.021 (2011).
18 Risco, C., Anton, I. M., Enjuanes, L. & Carrascosa, J. L. The transmissible gastroenteritis coronavirus contains a spherical core shell consisting of M and N proteins. *J Virol* **70**, 4773-4777 (1996).
19 McBride, R., van Zyl, M. & Fielding, B. C. The coronavirus nucleocapsid is a multifunctional protein. *Viruses* **6**, 2991-3018, doi:10.3390/v6082991 (2014).
20 Fehr, A. R. & Perlman, S. Coronaviruses: an overview of their replication and pathogenesis. *Methods Mol Biol* **1282**, 1-23, doi:10.1007/978-1-4939-2438-7_1 (2015).
21 Zhang, T., Wu, Q. & Zhang, Z. Probable Pangolin Origin of SARS-CoV-2 Associated with the COVID-19 Outbreak. *Curr Biol*, doi:10.1016/j.cub.2020.03.022 (2020).
22 Luan, J., Lu, Y., Jin, X. & Zhang, L. Spike protein recognition of mammalian ACE2 predicts the host range and an optimized ACE2 for SARS-CoV-2 infection. *Biochem Biophys Res Commun*, doi:10.1016/j.bbrc.2020.03.047 (2020).
23 Tilocca, B. *et al.* Molecular basis of COVID-19 relationships in different species: a one health perspective. *Microbes Infect*, doi:10.1016/j.micinf.2020.03.002 (2020).
24 Kames, J. *et al.* TissueCoCoPUTs: Novel Human Tissue-Specific Codon and Codon-Pair Usage Tables Based on Differential Tissue Gene Expression. *J Mol Biol*, doi:10.1016/j.jmb.2020.01.011 (2020).
25 Longxian Lv, G. L., Jinhui Chen, Xinle Liang, Yudong Li. Comparative genomic analysis revealed specific mutation pattern between human coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and Bat-SARSr-CoV RaTG13. doi:10.1101/2020.02.27.969006 (2020).
26 Namy, O., Moran, S. J., Stuart, D. I., Gilbert, R. J. & Brierley, I. A mechanical explanation of RNA pseudoknot function in programmed ribosomal frameshifting. *Nature* **441**, 244-247, doi:10.1038/nature04735 (2006).
27 Baranov, P. V. *et al.* Programmed ribosomal frameshifting in decoding the SARS-CoV genome. *Virology* **332**, 498-510, doi:10.1016/j.virol.2004.11.038 (2005).
28 Zadeh, J. N. *et al.* NUPACK: Analysis and design of nucleic acid systems. *J Comput Chem* **32**, 170-173, doi:10.1002/jcc.21596 (2011).
29 Kimchi, O., Cragnolini, T., Brenner, M. P. & Colwell, L. J. A Polymer Physics Framework for the Entropy of Arbitrary Pseudoknots. *Biophys J* **117**, 520-532, doi:10.1016/j.bpj.2019.06.037 (2019).
30 Dirks, R. M. & Pierce, N. A. An algorithm for computing nucleic acid base-pairing probabilities including pseudoknots. *J Comput Chem* **25**, 1295-1304, doi:10.1002/jcc.20057 (2004).
31 Sharp, P. M. & Li, W. H. An evolutionary perspective on synonymous codon usage in unicellular organisms. *J Mol Evol* **24**, 28-38, doi:10.1007/bf02099948 (1986).
32 Kaplan, B. S. *et al.* Vaccination of pigs with a codon-pair bias de-optimized live attenuated influenza vaccine protects from homologous challenge. *Vaccine* **36**, 1101-1107, doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2018.01.027 (2018).
33 Mueller, S. *et al.* Live attenuated influenza virus vaccines by computer-aided rational design. *Nat Biotechnol* **28**, 723-726, doi:10.1038/nbt.1636 (2010).
34 Mueller, S., Papamichail, D., Coleman, J. R., Skiena, S. & Wimmer, E. Reduction of the rate of poliovirus protein synthesis through large-scale codon deoptimization causes attenuation of viral virulence by lowering specific infectivity. *J Virol* **80**, 9687-9696, doi:10.1128/JVI.00738-06 (2006).

35 Manokaran, G., Sujatmoko, McPherson, K. G. & Simmons, C. P. Attenuation of a dengue virus replicon by codon deoptimization of nonstructural genes. *Vaccine* **37**, 2857-2863, doi:10.1016/j.vaccine.2019.03.062 (2019).
36 Cai, Y. *et al.* A Lassa Fever Live-Attenuated Vaccine Based on Codon Deoptimization of the Viral Glycoprotein Gene. *mBio* **11**, doi:10.1128/mBio.00039-20 (2020).
37 Tsai, Y. H. *et al.* Enterovirus A71 Containing Codon-Deoptimized VP1 and High-Fidelity Polymerase as Next-Generation Vaccine Candidate. *J Virol* **93**, doi:10.1128/JVI.02308-18 (2019).
38 Le Nouen, C., Collins, P. L. & Buchholz, U. J. Attenuation of Human Respiratory Viruses by Synonymous Genome Recoding. *Front Immunol* **10**, 1250, doi:10.3389/fimmu.2019.01250 (2019).
39 Walsh, I. M., Bowman, M. A., Soto Santarriaga, I. F., Rodriguez, A. & Clark, P. L. Synonymous codon substitutions perturb cotranslational protein folding in vivo and impair cell fitness. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* **117**, 3528-3534, doi:10.1073/pnas.1907126117 (2020).
40 Wimmer, E., Mueller, S., Tumpey, T. M. & Taubenberger, J. K. Synthetic viruses: a new opportunity to understand and prevent viral disease. *Nat Biotechnol* **27**, 1163-1172, doi:10.1038/nbt.1593 (2009).
41 O'Leary, N. A. *et al.* Reference sequence (RefSeq) database at NCBI: current status, taxonomic expansion, and functional annotation. *Nucleic Acids Res* **44**, D733-745, doi:10.1093/nar/gkv1189 (2016).
42 LingPy. A Python library for historical linguistics v. 2.6.5 (2019).

Author contributions statement

J.K., D.D.H. and O.K. conducted analysis, verified analytic methods, prepared figures and assisted in preparing the original manuscript.

M.D., N.H-K., T.W. and A.A.K. suggested analyses, conducted critical review of the data and assisted in preparing the original manuscript.

A.A. and C.K-S. conceived the original idea, suggested analyses, conducted critical review of the data and prepared the original manuscript.

Additional information

Funding

This work was supported by funds from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration Chief Scientist grant and in part supported by the National Institutes of Health grant HL121779 (A.A.K.).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

Figure and Table Legends

Figure 1 – Codon frequencies per 1000 for SARS-CoV-2 (Red), *Homo sapiens* (Genomic, Black) and Lung (Yellow). Codons are grouped by the amino acid they encode (alternating light blue columns, Met and Trp represented as single letter).

Figure 2 – Heat maps of log transformed codon pair frequencies per 1M for *Homo sapiens* (Genomic, **A**), SARS-CoV-2 (**B**) and the absolute value of difference between the two (**C**). Codon pairs increase in frequency from dark to light.

Figure 3 – Dinucleotide (**A**) and junction dinucleotide (**B**) frequencies per 1000 for SARS-CoV-2 (Red), *Homo sapiens* (Genomic, Black) and Lung (Yellow).

Figure 4 - **A**: The predicted minimum free energy (MFE) secondary structure of the novel coronavirus RNA in the 75 nts following the frameshift. All MFE structures displayed are those predicted by our landscape enumeration algorithm; results discussed were found to be insensitive to prediction algorithm by comparison to NuPack. **B-C:** Known coronaviruses with high degree of sequence and structure similarity to the novel coronavirus. **D-H** Known coronaviruses with a high degree of structure similarity to the novel coronavirus, but less sequence similarity. See main text for further discussion. **I:** In addition to examining the predicted MFE structures, we considered the full free-energy landscapes. The probability of each coronavirus to form a pseudoknot in the 75 nts following the frameshift (orange), and the probability of the first stem to be part of a 3-stem pseudoknot (blue), are histogrammed.

Figure 5 – Scatterplots of RSCU bias [average ln(RSCU)] (**A**) and Codon Pair Bias (**B**) by CDS length of human and viral genes. Human genes appear as grey dots and viral genes appear with different colored markers.

Figure 6 – Seven codon sliding window average of ln(RSCU) (**A**) and codon pair score (CPS) (**B**) of structural SARS-CoV-2 genes. Genes are shown in the order they appear in the viral genome, but gaps between open reading frames have been removed. Genes alternate in colors black and blue for clarity, with the gene name in the corresponding color appearing above or below the window. RSCU and CPS are calculated based on *Homo sapiens* genomic codon and codon pair usage.

Table 1 – Euclidean distance (scaled /1000) between codon pair usage frequencies of SARS-CoV-2, Coronaviridae (All CoV), *Homo sapiens* (genomic), lung, kidney (cortex), small intestine (terminal ileum), *Pholidota* (pangolins), *Chiroptera* (bats) and *Canis lupus familiaris*.

Table 2 – Codon and codon pair metrics of SARS-CoV-2 genes. Relative synonymous codon usage (RSCU), ln(RSCU) and codon pair bias (CPB) for 11 viral genes.

Figure 1

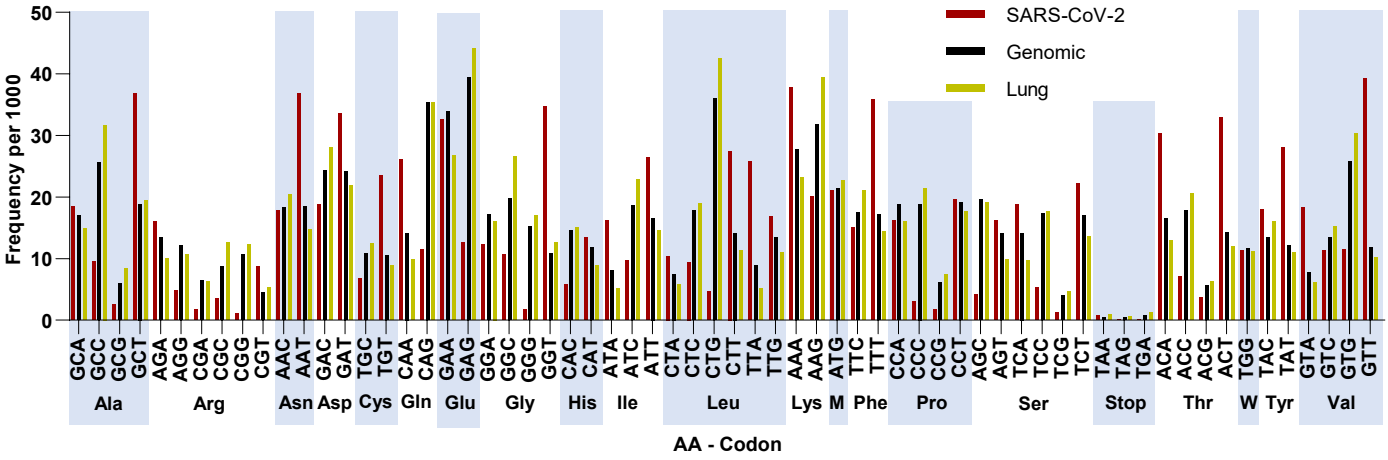

SARS-CoV-2
Genomic
Lung
Frequency per 1000
50
40
30
20
10
0
GCA GCC GCG GCT AGA AGG CGA CGC CGG CGT AAC AAT GAC GAT TGC TGT CAA CAG GAA GAG GGA GGC GGG GGT CAC CAT ATA ATC ATT CTA CTC CTG CTT TTA TTG AAA AAG ATG TTC TTT CCA CCC CCG CCT AGC AGT TCA TCC TCG TCT TAA TAG TGA ACA ACC ACG ACT TGG TAC TAT GTA GTC GTG GTT
Ala Arg Asn Asp Cys Gln Glu Gly His Ile Leu Lys M Phe Pro Ser Stop Thr W Tyr Val
AA - Codon

Figure 2

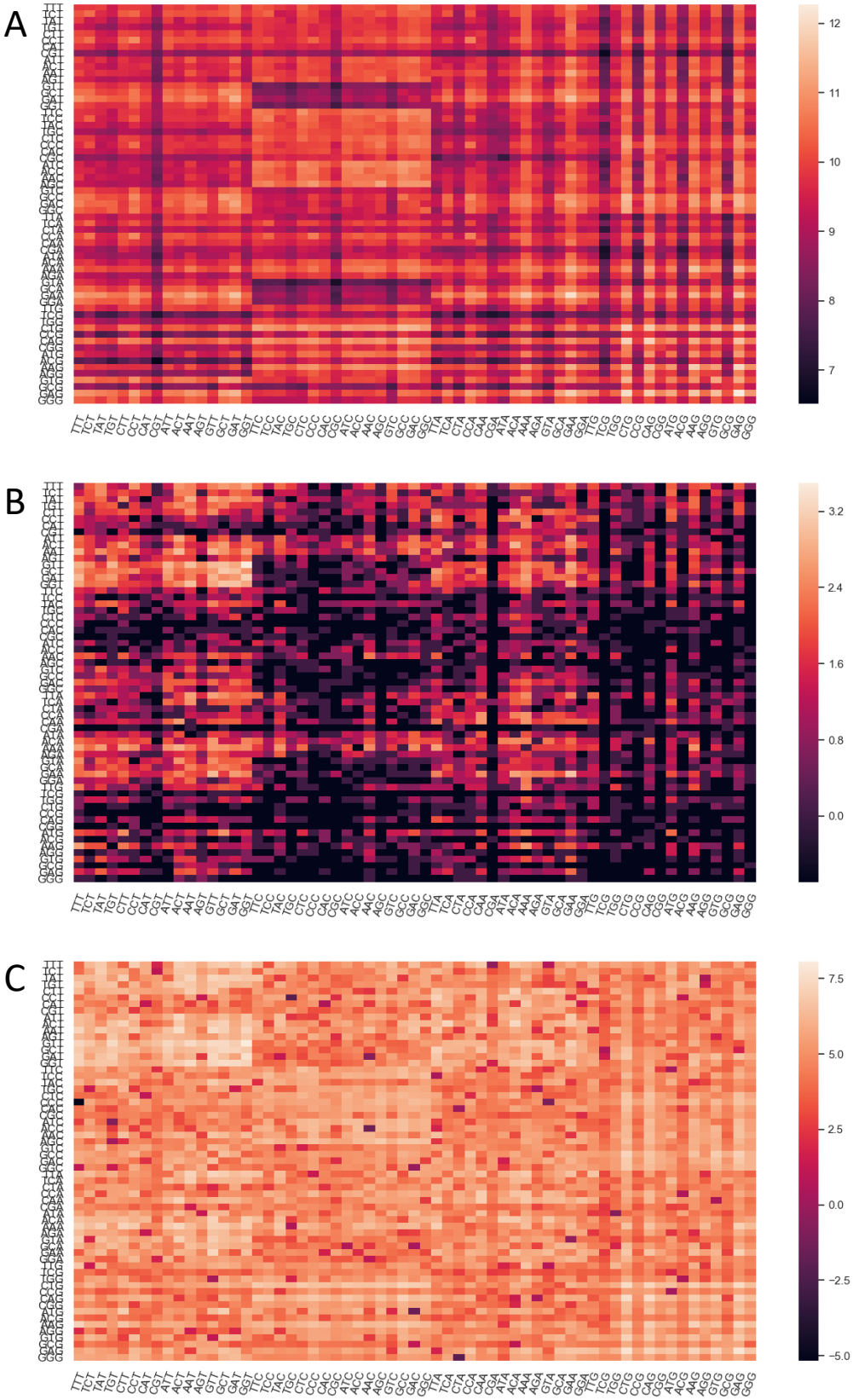
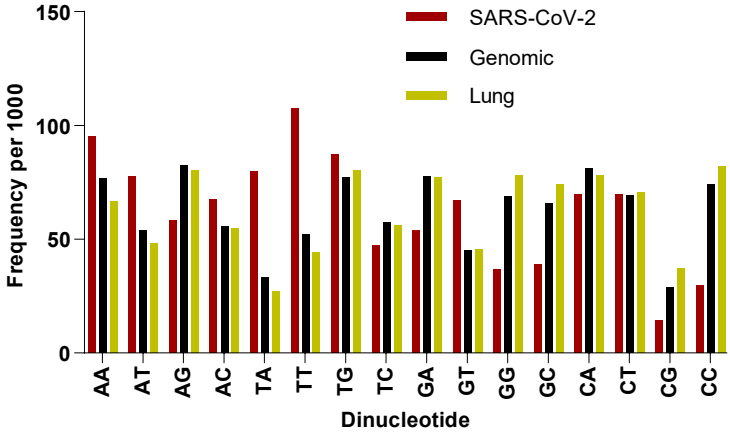


Figure 3

A


SARS-CoV-2
Genomic
Lung
Frequency per 1000
150
100
50
0
AA
AT
AG
AC
TA
TT
TG
TC
GA
GT
GG
GC
CA
CT
CG
CC
Dinucleotide

B

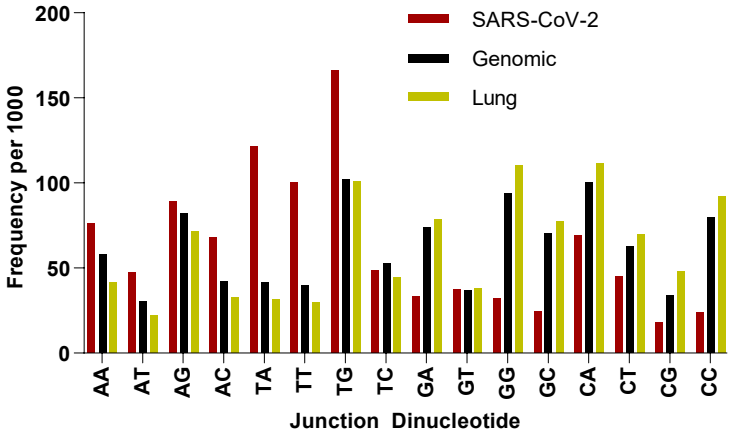

SARS-CoV-2
Genomic
Lung
Frequency per 1000
200
150
100
50
0
AA
AT
AG
AC
TA
TT
TG
TC
GA
GT
GG
GC
CA
CT
CG
CC
Junction Dinucleotide

Figure 4

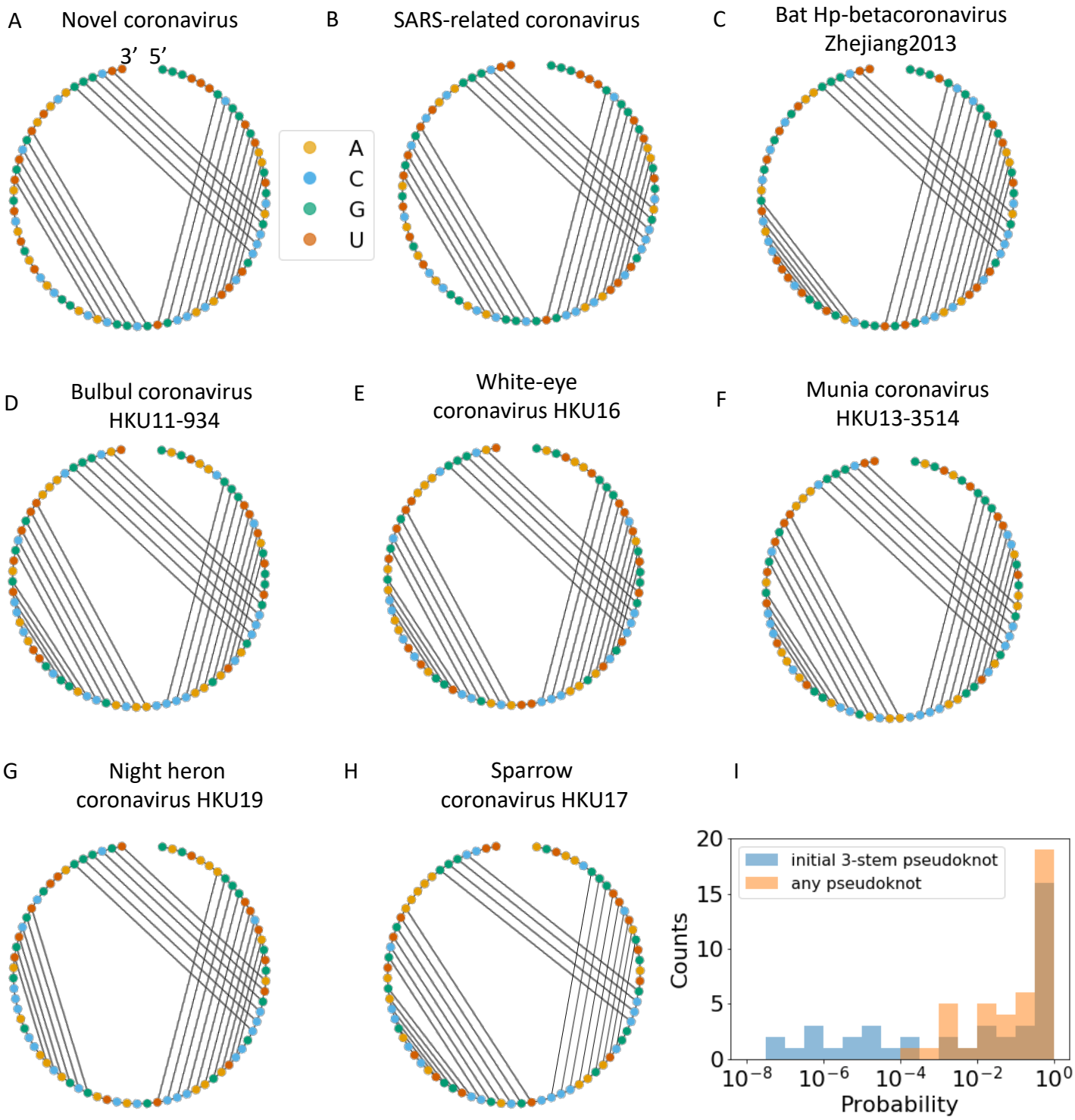
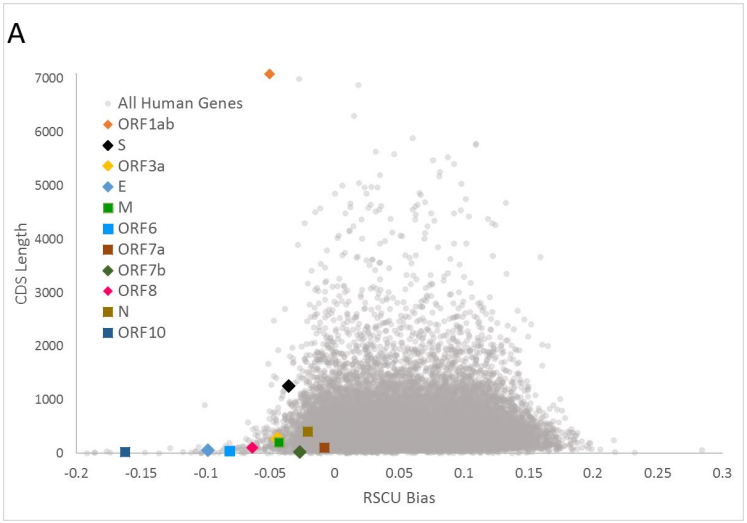

A
Novel coronavirus
3’ 5’
B
SARS-related coronavirus
C
Bat Hp-betacoronavirus Zhejiang2013
A
C
G
U
D
Bulbul coronavirus HKU11-934
E
White-eye coronavirus HKU16
F
Munia coronavirus HKU13-3514
G
Night heron coronavirus HKU19
H
Sparrow coronavirus HKU17
I
initial 3-stem pseudoknot
any pseudoknot
Counts
Probability
20
15
10
5
0
10^{-8}
10^{-6}
10^{-4}
10^{-2}
10^{0}

Figure 5


A
7000
6000
5000
4000
3000
2000
1000
0
CDS Length
All Human Genes
ORF1ab
S
ORF3a
E
M
ORF6
ORF7a
ORF7b
ORF8
N
ORF10
-0.2
-0.15
-0.1
-0.05
0
0.05
0.1
0.15
0.2
0.25
0.3
RSCU Bias

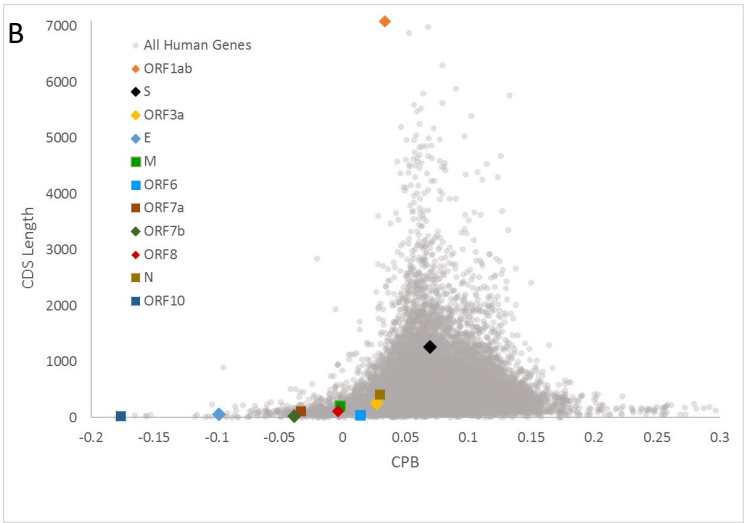
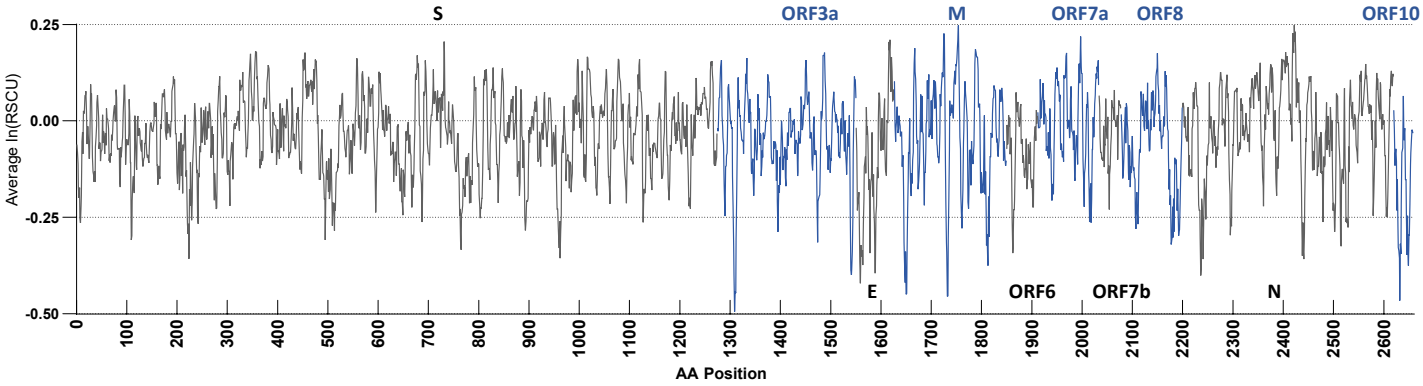

B
7000
6000
5000
4000
3000
2000
1000
0
CDS Length
All Human Genes
ORF1ab
S
ORF3a
E
M
ORF6
ORF7a
ORF7b
ORF8
N
ORF10
-0.2
-0.15
-0.1
-0.05
0
0.05
0.1
0.15
0.2
0.25
0.3
CPB

Figure 6

A


S
ORF3a
M
ORF7a
ORF8
ORF10
E
ORF6
ORF7b
N
Average ln(RSCU)
0.25
0.00
-0.25
-0.50
0
100
200
300
400
500
600
700
800
900
1000
1100
1200
1300
1400
1500
1600
1700
1800
1900
2000
2100
2200
2300
2400
2500
2600
AA Position

B

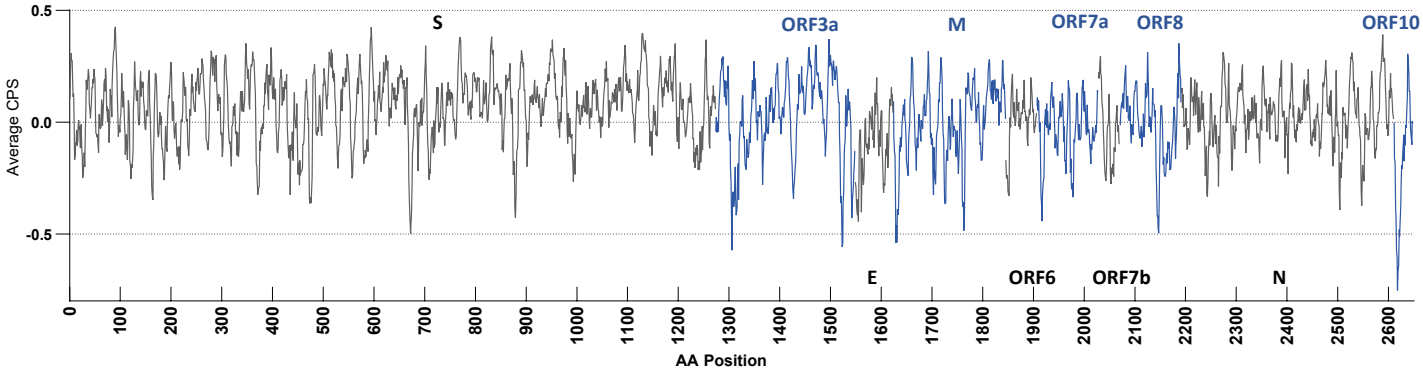

S
ORF3a
M
ORF7a
ORF8
ORF10
E
ORF6
ORF7b
N
Average CPS
0.5
0.0
-0.5
0
100
200
300
400
500
600
700
800
900
1000
1100
1200
1300
1400
1500
1600
1700
1800
1900
2000
2100
2200
2300
2400
2500
2600
AA Position

Table 1 – Euclidean distances between codon pair usage frequencies

	SARS-CoV-2	**All CoV**	***H. sapiens* Genomic**	**Lung**	**Kidney**	**Small Intestine**	**Pholidota**	**Chiroptera**
All CoV	12.75							
***H. sapiens* Genomic**	23.20	20.79						
Lung	26.18	23.52	5.80					
Kidney	26.12	23.43	6.00	1.56				
Small Intestine	25.93	23.26	5.54	1.73	1.85			
Pholidota	24.69	22.16	2.76	4.18	4.46	4.09		
Chiroptera	24.00	21.54	1.75	4.70	4.91	4.48	1.76	
Canis lupus familiaris	23.68	21.24	1.28	5.18	5.37	4.92	2.18	1.04

Table 2 – Codon and codon pair metrics of SARS-CoV-2 genes

	ORF1ab	S	ORF3a	E	M	ORF6	ORF7a	ORF7b	ORF8	N	ORF10
Avg RSCU	0.98	1.00	0.99	0.97	1.01	0.95	1.04	1.02	0.98	1.02	0.88
Avg ln(RSCU)	-0.05	-0.04	-0.05	-0.10	-0.04	-0.08	0.00	-0.03	-0.07	-0.02	-0.17
CPB	0.03	0.07	0.03	-0.10	0.00	0.02	-0.03	-0.04	0.00	0.03	-0.17