**Sequence analysis**

**mTAGs: taxonomic profiling using degenerate consensus reference sequences of ribosomal RNA genes**

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**Abstract**

Summary: Profiling the taxonomic composition of microbial communities commonly involves the classification of ribosomal RNA gene fragments. As a trade-off to maintain high classification accuracy, existing tools are typically limited to the genus level. Here, we present mTAGs, a taxonomic profiling tool that implements the alignment of metagenomic sequencing reads to degenerate consensus reference sequences of small subunit ribosomal RNA genes. It uses DNA fragments, that is, paired-end sequencing reads, as count units and provides relative abundance profiles at multiple taxonomic ranks, including operational taxonomic units (OTUs) based on a 97% sequence identity cutoff. At the genus rank, mTAGs outperformed other tools across several metrics, such as the F₁ score by >11% across data from different environments, and achieved competitive (F₁ score) or better results (Bray-Curtis dissimilarity) at the sub-genus level.

Availability and implementation: The software tool mTAGs is implemented in Python. The source code and binaries are freely available (https://github.com/SushiLab/mTAGs).

Supplementary information: Supplementary information is available at Bioinformatics online. The data and analysis scripts used in this article are available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4352762.

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**1 Introduction**

The relative abundance of taxa in a microbial community can be estimated by classifying sequences of phylogenetic marker genes. A common approach involves the generation of polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-derived amplicon sequences using oligonucleotide primers to target highly conserved regions of the small subunit ribosomal RNA (SSU-rRNA) gene. However, this approach has several limitations due to the introduction of errors (Acinas et al. 2005) and taxonomic selection biases (Hong et al. 2009) in the PCR step, and the inconsistency of results when targeting different variable regions of the SSU-rRNA gene (Claesson et al. 2010). As an alternative, the generation of metagenomic data, i.e. by shotgun-sequencing of microbial community DNA, allows for an unbiased extraction of SSU-rRNA gene fragments (Logares et al. 2014) and their subsequent classification to generate taxonomic profiles. However, current tools performing SSU-rRNA gene-based taxonomic profiling of metagenomes (Shah et al. 2011; Bengtsson-Palme et al. 2015; Guo et al. 2019)
The classification performance of SSU-rRNA gene fragments of PCR-targeted or metagenomic origin differs between tools using reference sequence databases of reduced complexity (e.g. Schloss et al. 2009; Matias Rodrigues et al. 2017; Bolyen et al. 2019). The construction of such reference databases may thus be a critical factor, in particular at high taxonomic resolution, that is, at ranks below the genus level, such as the operational taxonomic unit (OTU) defined at a 97% sequence identity cutoff. Here, we tested if the use of the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) code for nucleotides to generate a reference database, in which each OTU is represented by a degenerate consensus sequence of all respective members, would increase the accuracy of individual SSU-rRNA sequence classification and community composition profiling at different taxonomic ranks. We implemented this approach in a new taxonomic profiler for metagenomes named mTAGs.

We show an advantage of this method over simply using the longest sequence as an OTU representative, and that at the genus level, mTAGs provides higher accuracy compared to other tools that are commonly used to classify SSU-rRNA gene fragments (Schloss et al. 2009; Caporaso et al. 2010; Matias Rodrigues et al. 2017; Bolyen et al. 2019).

**2 Tool description**

The mTAGs tool uses a reference database, which was built by first clustering sequences into OTUs within each genus defined in the full-length SILVA SSU database version 138 (Quast et al. 2013) at 97% identity. Then, for each OTU a degenerate consensus sequence was generated using the IUPAC DNA code to represent all respective member sequences (see Suppl. Information). The tool is capable of processing single-end and paired-end reads, takes advantage of the information contained in any region of the SSU-rRNA gene and provides relative abundance profiles at multiple taxonomic ranks, including OTUs. mTAGs takes shotgun-sequenced metagenomic data as an input and uses hidden Markov models to detect sequence fragments from any position of the SSU rRNA gene. These fragments are aligned to the reference database and conservatively classified to a taxonomic rank (according to the SILVA taxonomy) by determining the last common ancestor of all target sequences. The runtime of mTAGs increases linearly with the size of the metagenome (see Suppl. Information) at a rate of 53 s per million reads processed (wallclock time using eight CPU threads; 306 s in CPU time) allowing the processing of deeply sequenced metagenomes in reasonable time (i.e., ~100 million paired-end reads in ~1.5 h). Although the primary use of mTAGs is the taxonomic profiling of metagenomes, it can also be used for profiling SSU-rRNA amplicon data or for classifying amplicon sequence variants produced by other methods (Callahan et al. 2016; Edgar 2016).

**3 Results**

We benchmarked the effect of differences in the generation of the reference database by classifying reads of known identity (Fig. 1A; Supplementary Figure 1; Suppl. Information). The definition of the representative sequence for each OTU as a degenerate consensus sequence of all its respective members, rather than the longest sequence, resulted in a ~14% increase in classification performance at the OTU level when profiling paired-end reads of 250 bp (14.0%, 14.1% and 14.0% for precision, recall and F1 score respectively). A 25.4% increase in taxonomic profiling performance was observed as measured by an increase in the median Bray-Curtis similarity to the true profiles from
mTAGs: taxonomic profiling of ribosomal RNA genes

0.355 to 0.265 (Supplementary Figure 1). This effect was still observed for reads of 150 bp, while no effect was found for reads of 100 bp and/or higher taxonomic ranks (Supplementary Figure 1).

For an independent evaluation and comparison of classification and profiling performance, we used simulated data from previous work (Almeida et al. 2018) using SSU-rRNA datasets comprising the most abundant genera found in the human gut, ocean, and soil environments (Fig. 1B; Supplementary Figure 2) to benchmark a number of taxonomic profiling tools. In this comparison (Fig. 1B), mTAGs achieved a median F1 score of 0.88 and a median Bray-Curtis similarity to the expected abundance profile of 0.89 outperforming other tools classifying SSU-rRNA gene fragments down to the genus-level, the lowest taxonomic rank common to all tools (QIIME 1, QIIME 2, mothur and MAPseq achieved median F1 scores of 0.72, 0.80, 0.53 and 0.60 and Bray-Curtis similarities of 0.75, 0.77, 0.51 and 0.60, respectively). mTAGs had a high median precision of 0.98, comparable to the precision of MAPseq, and a median recall of 0.80, which was the highest value among the tested tools (Fig. 1B). This high classification performance was consistent for data from different environments (human gut, ocean and soil) and also when tested separately for different hypersensitive regions within the full-length SSU-rRNA gene (see Suppl. Information and Supplementary Figure 2).

To assess the performance of mTAGs for shotgun metagenomics data and at the sub-genus level, a third evaluation was performed with human and mouse-associated metagenomes (Meyer et al. 2021). This benchmark was performed in comparison with MAPseq, which was the only tool that provided outputs at the sub-genus taxonomic level (Figure 1C; Supplementary Figure 3). At this level (OTU level and NCBI species level for mTAGs and MAPseq, respectively) mTAGs achieved higher median Bray-Curtis similarity to the expected abundance profile, while the median F1 score was comparable between the tools (Figure 1C). A breakdown of the F1 score showed a lower precision, but higher recall of mTAGs compared to MAPseq (Supplementary Figure 3).

4 Conclusions

With mTAGs, we introduce a freely-available tool for SSU-rRNA gene-based microbial community profiling that defines degenerate consensus sequences and uses them as a reference database to enable OTU-level relative abundance estimation.

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