Catalytic Cyanation of C–N Bonds with CO\(_2\)/NH\(_3\)

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Cite This: JACS Au 2022, 2, 2522−2528

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**ABSTRACT:** Cyanation of benzylic C–N bonds is useful in the preparation of important \(\alpha\)-aryl nitriles. The first general catalytic cyanation of \(\alpha\)-(hetero)aryl amines, analogous to the Sandmeyer reaction of anilines, was developed using reductive cyanation with CO\(_2\)/NH\(_3\). A broad array of \(\alpha\)-aryl nitriles was obtained in high yields and regioselectivity by C–N cleavage of intermediates as ammonium salts. Good tolerance of functional groups such as ethers, CF\(_3\), F, Cl, esters, indoles, and benzothiophenes was achieved.

Using \(^{13}\)CO\(_2\), a \(^{13}\)C-labeled tryptamine homologue (five steps, 31% yield) and Cysmethynil (six steps, 37% yield) were synthesized. Both electronic and steric effects of ligands influence the reactivity of alkyl nickel species with electrophilic silyl isocyanates and thus determine the reactivity and selectivity of the cyanation reaction. This work contributes to the understanding of the controllable activation of CO\(_2\)/NH\(_3\) and provides the promising potential of the amine cyanation reaction in the synthesis of bio-relevant molecules.

**KEYWORDS:** reductive cyanation, utilization of CO\(_2\)/NH\(_3\), nitrile synthesis, \(\alpha\)-(hetero)aryl amines, C–N activation, nickel, isotope labeling

**INTRODUCTION**

Selective transformation of C–N bonds is attractive but challenging.

1-3 Although the transformation of amines to nitriles is a straightforward process, examples have been published only infrequently. The Sandmeyer reaction is the traditional method for the cyanation of anilines and involves *in situ* preparation of aryldiazonium salts (Figure 1a).4,5 In addition, the cyanation of C–N bonds is difficult to achieve via traditional S\(_2\),2- or S\(_3\),1-type reactions. Recently, Watson *et al.* developed the nickel-catalyzed cyanation of Katritzky pyridinium salts with Zn(CN)\(_2\) and one example of benzylic pyridinium salt was reported.6 C–N bond cleavage of enamionones promoted by I\(_2\) for synthesis of \(\beta\)-cyano enones was also realized.7 Expanding the diversity of C–C coupling reactions is a main topic in modern chemistry,8-28 and utilization of CO\(_2\) as the most abundant, nontoxic C\(_1\) synthon provides a promising approach to economically generate desirable products.29,30 Recently, Martin *et al.* and Yu *et al.* have reported carboxylation of C–N bonds in benzyl ammonium salts with CO\(_2\),31,32 The utilization of CO\(_2\) in catalytic synthesis of nitriles however is yet to be explored.

Inspired by the biological 2e-reduction process for the formation of cyanide ligands in [NiFe]-hydrogenase from CO\(_2\) and NH\(_3\),33 we have prepared aryl nitriles by cyanation of aryl halides using CO\(_2\).34,35 The wide application of the Sandmeyer reaction of anilines led us to envision a Sandmeyer reaction-like system for cyanation of \(\alpha\)-aryl amines, and to the best of

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**Figure 1.** (a) Sandmeyer reaction and (b) cyanation of \(\alpha\)-aryl amines using CO\(_2\)/NH\(_3\).
our knowledge, a general procedure of C−N bond cyanation to afford α-aryl nitriles has not yet been reported. Moreover, the selective incorporation of cyano group has attracted tremendous attention.\textsuperscript{36–39} Even by far, the most prominent production process for adiponitrile (>10\textsuperscript{8} tons per year) is suffering from toxic cyanide and costly purification.\textsuperscript{44} Herein, we report the first example of general cyanation of α-aryl amines via the challenging C−N bond cleavage for the synthesis of α-aryl nitriles using CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} (Figure 1b). This nickel-catalyzed reaction allows the synthesis of one carbon longer nitrile via a cyanation−reduction−cyanation sequence from a simple substrate, and it has been successfully applied to the convenient synthesis of isotonically labeled tryptamine precursors.\textsuperscript{45,46} Notably, no desired product was detected when metal cyanides were used. Thus, the reductive electrophilic cyanation process using cheap and abundant CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} provides an alternative chemical platform for C−C coupling reactions and offers a hitherto unrecognized opportunity for cyanide-free synthesis of bio-relevant α-(hetero)aryl nitriles.

\section*{RESULTS AND DISCUSSION}

Initially, our investigation began by carrying out reactions on benzyl ammonium salt (1a) formed in situ by the reaction of the amine (1a\textsuperscript{+}) with Mel (Table 1). During optimization, careful selection of reductants is crucial to evade the undesired reduction pathways, such as hydrolysis of ammonium salt, reduction of CO\textsubscript{2}, and/or reduction of nitrile products. Under CO\textsubscript{2} and NH\textsubscript{3} both at atmospheric pressure, the use of phenyl silane efficiently provided the cyanated products, albeit in low to moderate regioselectivities (Table 1, entries 1 and 2, 49−87% yields; 18−68% selectivity for 2a). DIOP turned to be the best ligand among the various ligands tested (Table S2).\textsuperscript{47−50} Since ligands containing a DIOP backbone proved to be suitable for the reaction, various DIOP derivatives (L1−L7) with different steric and electronic properties were synthesized and tested. It was found that the more sterically hindered ligand L3 (\((R,R)-3,5$-Me$-DIOP\)) provided a better reactivity (entries 3−8 and Table S2).\textsuperscript{51−53} Also, when using L3 as the ligand, the switchable regioselectivity between the α-aryl nitrile (2a) and linear nitrile (4a) could be well tuned, and the desired product (2a) was obtained in good yield with high regioselectivity (entry 4, 80% yield; 84:5:11 \(\tau_r\)). These results highlight the adjustment of the ability of ligands for selective cyanation on the benzylic carbon over other positions.

With the optimal conditions in hand, we next examined the substrate scope in the synthesis of different α-(hetero)aryl nitriles (Table 2). Considering the electronic properties, we found that benzyl ammonium salts (1) bearing electron-rich or electron-deficient groups could deliver the α-aryl nitriles in moderate to good yields with high regioselectivity (2a−2f). However, the reaction gave racemic products. Substrates containing various functional groups such as fluorne (1c), phenyl (1d), and naphthalene (1f) were examined. All were smoothly converted to the corresponding α-aryl nitriles in yields of 74−81%. Notably, selective cyanation between C−N and C−O bonds to form the α-aryl nitrile product (2e) could be achieved, albeit in diminished yield under the established conditions.

Aryl acetonitrile compounds are valuable intermediates and are generally used for diverse modification at their α-carbon to synthesize chiral α-amino acid precursors.\textsuperscript{54−57} Remarkably, the devised protocol is applicable to synthesize aryl acetonitriles (2) from the corresponding primary benzyl ammonium salts (1), showcasing the versatile utility of this methodology. Initially, we evaluated the catalytic cyanation of the benzyl ammonium salt (1g) with CO\textsubscript{2} and NH\textsubscript{3} (Tables S3−S5). Examination of the reaction parameters showed that the cyanation of 1g with CO\textsubscript{2}/NH\textsubscript{3} and organophosphorus ligands catalyzed by NiBr\textsubscript{2} proceeds efficiently (Table S4). Evaluation of various ligands showed that phosphine-containing ligands outperformed ligands containing nitrogen in both reactivity and chemoselectivity. Systematic investigation of phosphine ligands by changing the chain length between two phosphorus atoms was found to improve the yield of 2g. The ligand 1,2-bis(diphenylphosphino)ethane (dpppe) showed a remarkable performance, producing 2g in 81% yield.

Generally, studies of the substrate scope revealed that ammonium salts bearing various substituents are tolerated and afford the desired aryl acetonitriles in moderate to high yields (Table 2). Use of \(^{13}\)CO\textsubscript{2} led us to explore a catalytic protocol to prepare isotopically labeled nitriles. First, using \(^{13}\)CO\textsubscript{2} we obtained \(^{13}\)C-2g in 83% yield, showing that the carbon source of the CN group in the product was derived from CO\textsubscript{2}. This reaction exhibited excellent chemoselectivity, and it was found that benzyl ammonium salts substituted with either electrondonating groups (Me, OMe, Et, t-Bu, and OCF\textsubscript{3}) or electron-withdrawing groups (CF\textsubscript{3}, F, COOME, and COOEt-Bu) are well tolerated, giving 2h−2n, 2p−2s, and 2v−2w. The reaction is applicable to aromatic substrates with fused rings (2o, 2x, and 2y), indicating that molecules with expanded π-conjugated systems are tolerated. A substrate with chlorine on the aromatic ring provided the chlorophenyl nitrile (2i) in 50% yield, together with phenyl nitrile as a byproduct formed by dehalogenative hydrogenolysis. It is noteworthy that the benzyl C−N bond of the ammonium salt (1z) was selectively converted to the corresponding nitrile (2z) in 89% yield with the benzyl C−O bond remaining intact. In contrast, only a trace amount of product was formed in the presence of the
cyanating reagent, Zn(CN)$_2$. We studied the reaction of heterocyclic substrates such as indole and furan and found the method to be applicable, obtaining 2aa−2ae in yields of 77−90%. Specifically, cyanation of the 3-substituted indole ammonium salt provided the tryptamine precursor (2ad) in a good yield. Subsequent reduction of 2ad with LiAlH$_4$ provided the tryptamine derivative in two steps, a method that is far superior to the classical method that requires more steps and a tedious workup. At the same time, different aliphatic amines were tested and almost no desired nitrile products could be obtained.

Tryptamine precursors produced from indole are a privileged motif in biological and pharmaceutical research, but only limited methods are known for their preparation. We prepared the intermediate indole-3-carbonitrile (3c) in 72% yield with a nickel-catalyzed reaction with CO$_2$ and NH$_3$. Treatment of $^{13}$CO$_2$ with ammonium salt (3e) and NH$_3$ under standard conditions gave the $^{13}$C-labeled tryptamine precursor (13C-2ad) in 66% yield (Scheme 1). This protocol provides an alternative valuable route to construct homologous tryptamines or $^{13}$C-labeled indole derivatives efficiently. This methodology has also been applied to the production of $^{13}$C-labeled Cysmethynil (Scheme 2). The reaction of the indole ammonium salt (4e) with $^{13}$CO$_2$ and NH$_3$ provided the $^{13}$C-labeled intermediate indole derivative (4f) in 62% yield, and this was finally converted by treatment with potassium hydroxide to $^{13}$C-labeled Cysmethynil (4g) in 89% yield.

### STUDIES OF THE MECHANISM

Additional experiments were conducted in an effort to understand the mechanism of this transformation. Radical clock experiments were conducted with benzyl ammonium salts (1n) and α-cyclopropylstyrene (5). The ring-expanded product (6) was obtained in 20% yield (Scheme 3a-I). The benzyl ammonium salt (1n) was converted to o-methoxycinnamyl acetonitrile (2n) in 66% yield along with the ring-expanded product (6) (Scheme 3a-II) in 13% yield. These results indicate that although the well-known oxidative addition of ammonium salts to Ni(0) is regarded as a major pathway, the alternative radical pathway cannot be excluded. In the presence of a Hantzsch ester, the benzyl ammonium salt (1n), a hydrogen donor capable of trapping carbon radicals (Scheme 3b), was transformed into the nitrile (2n), which was
formed as a major product in 63% yield, with the formation of a minor product, 2-methylanisole, under standard conditions. This result is in accord with the hypothesis that a benzyl radical was formed in the mixture and subsequently reacted with a hydrogen of the Hantzsch ester to give 2-methylanisole. Control experiments were conducted to gain more information on the active benzyl-nickel species. As shown in Scheme 3e, in the absence of zinc powder, only trace amounts of nitriles were detected to be formed, with 95:0:5 regioselectivity. Since nickel(II) complexes can be reduced to nickel(I) complexes by zinc powder through a single-electron transfer process and nickel(I) species can participate in Ni-catalyzed coupling or chain walking processes, a radical mechanism with nickel(I) active intermediates in which cyanylation is taking place. As shown in Scheme 3d, when the ammonium salt of 2-phenyl ethylamine (7) was the substrate, only trace amounts of nitriles were obtained. This result implies that an efficient C–N bond activation and the formation of benzyl-nickel intermediate are crucial for the efficient cyanylation of terminal sp³C-H bonds. We attempted to isolate the active intermediate in the reaction of the ortho-COOMe benzyl ammonium salt (1w) (see III-8 in the SI).66,67 Ni(dppe)₂ (8) was obtained, and its structure was confirmed by X-ray crystallography (Scheme 3e). Using compound 8 as the catalyst in the cyanylation of the benzyl ammonium salt (1n), the desired product was obtained in 15% yield. This implies that the nickel(0) active species is involved and the use of more ligand (in a ratio to Ni of 2:1) decreases the reactivity. When DIPAMP* (L9: (1,2-Bis((2-methoxyphenyl)(phenyl)phosphino)ethane) was used as the ligand, only 13% selectivity for 2a was observed (Table S2). In order to understand the regioselectivity differences between the bispophosphine ligand, DIOP* (L3), and DIPAMP* (L9), density functional theory (DFT) calculations based on the hybrid of the Becke’s three-parameter exchange functional and the Lee, Yang, and Parr correlation functional (B3LYP) were performed for the benzyl nickel species.68–70 The basis set used for C, H, O, P, and Br atoms was 6-31G, and the LANL2DZ pseudopotential basis set was employed for the Ni atom. The vibrational frequency was computed at the same level of theory to determine whether each optimized structure represented an energy minimum or a transition state. The natural population analysis charge was also calculated using the same method as in the optimization. As shown in Figure S3, different electronic densities on the Ni center (0.365 vs 0.345) and bite angles (P-Ni-P: 94.59 vs 78.22°) were obtained for these two ligands. This suggests that both the electronic and steric effects of ligands influence the reactivity with silyl isocyanates of alkyl nickel species and the tendency of chain walking via an iterative β-H elimination and reinsertion process.

Based on the experimental results and previous reports, we propose a plausible reaction mechanism for the benzyl nitriles (Figure 2).34,35,63,64,71 First, the nickel(II)-precursor formed *in situ* is reduced and the nickel(0)-species (I) is generated in the presence of silanes and Zn. Subsequently, the benzyl ammonium salt (1a) can be reduced by nickel(0) to give a benzyl radical and a nickel(I) species (II) followed by a radical addition reaction, which delivers the nickel(II) intermediate (III). This intermediate is then reduced by Zn and silanes to generate the thermodynamically favored benzyl-nickel(II) intermediate (IV), which is inserted by silyl isocyanate intermediates to give a transient imidate species (V) in the presence of DIOP* (L3) as the ligand. As a minor process, the β-hydrogen elimination of the intermediate benzyl-nickel(II) (IV) would form the nickel(I) hydride species, subsequently delivering the chain walking nitrile products.71–74 The key to success is the careful choice of the ligand, which favors the reactivity of the benzyl-nickel(I) intermediate and/or the silyl isocyanate insertion step. The transient imidate species (V) are then transformed into benzyl nitriles via a plausible 1,3-silyl N-to-O migration,75,76 accompanied by the formation of a nickel silicone intermediate (VI), which upon reduction by hydrosilane and zinc, regenerates the species (I), closing the catalytic cycle.
CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we have developed the catalytic cyanation of α-aryl amines via ammonium salt intermediates with CO$_2$/NH$_3$ as a source of the cyano group. This versatile protocol provides a straightforward and cyanide-free route to an array of valuable benzylic nitriles in moderate to good yields. The success of this cyanation reaction is attributed to the careful selection of a bispiphosphine ligand that can control the formation and/or reactivity of the benzylic-nickel(I) intermediate. This reaction exhibits broad functional group tolerance and operational simplicity. $^{13}$C-containing nitriles can be obtained conveniently using $^{13}$CO$_2$. The cyanation of C–N bonds with CO$_2$/NH$_3$ allows electrocyclic cyanation of the C–N bond to form cyano products and supports downstream applications in synthesis and their prospective use in the synthesis of bio-relevant molecules.

METHODS

General Procedure for the Reductive Cyanation of Ammonium Salts Forming Nitriles

Under a nitrogen atmosphere, the nickel-catalyst (12 mol %, 0.018 mmol), ligand (15 mol %, 0.0225 mmol), ZnF$_2$ (50 mol %, 0.075 mmol), Zn (1.2 equiv, 0.18 mmol), ammonium salts (1.0 equiv, 0.15 mmol), and a stirring bar were placed in a 10 mL oven-dried sealed tube (Figure S4). Then, the respective solvents and PhSiH$_3$ (5.0 equiv, 0.75 mmol) were injected by a syringe. The tube was sealed, and CO$_2$ (15 mL) and NH$_3$ (15 mL) were injected by a syringe after N$_2$ was removed under vacuum. Then, the mixture was stirred for the indicated time in a preheated alloy block. After the reaction was finished, the tube was cooled to room temperature and the pressure was released. The yield was measured by GC analysis or isolated by preparative thin-layer chromatography on silica gel plates to give nitriles (for the detailed procedure, see Figures S5 and S6).

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/jacsau.2c00392.

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Author Contributions

Y.L. supervised this study. F.Y. performed the catalytic experiments and mechanistic studies. J.-F.B., Y.D., C.L., and C.-X.D. discussed the result. S.L. performed the theoretical calculations. Y.D. performed part of synthetic experiments. Y.L. and F.Y. wrote the paper. All authors have given approval to the final version of the manuscript. CRediT: Fachao Yan data curation, investigation, methodology, writing-original draft; Jian-Fei Bai conceptualization, investigation; Yanan Dong data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, validation; Shaoli Liu data curation, investigation, software; Chen Li formal analysis, methodology, validation; Chen-xia Du methodology, resources; Yuehui Li conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, supervision, writing-original draft, writing-review & editing.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to dedicate this work to Professor Matthias Beller (LIKAT) on the occasion of his 60th birthday.
and acknowledge financial support by the NSFC (20222204, 22072167, and 22001257). F.Y. thanks Dr. Qiming Sun (Soochow University) for valuable discussions and help.

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