Selective Incorporation of Difluoromethylene Moieties into Arenes Assisted by Transition Metals

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Abstract: Fluorinated compounds are of significant importance in various fields due to their unique chemical, physical, and biological properties. Accordingly, the incorporation of fluorine atom(s) or fluorine-containing functionalities into organic molecules has received considerable attention. For decades, extensive reports and reviews mainly focused on the fluorination and perfluoroalkylation (especially trifluoromethylation) whereas the preparation of partially fluorinated compounds was less developed. Difluoromethylated arenes and their derivatives (ArCF₂R, R ≠ F, R₂H) have been found to be as important in pharmaceuticals as trifluoromethylated arenes. However, it is only recently that these compounds have experienced a revival of interest from synthetic chemists. The direct construction of carbon(sp²)–carbon(sp²) bonds via transition-metal-mediated cross-coupling reactions represents one of the most straightforward strategies for the introduction of difluoromethylene moieties (CF₂R, R ≠ F, R₂) to aromatic compounds. This mini-review focuses on recent advances of this research topic from both synthetic and mechanistic perspectives.

Keywords: Arenes · Difluoromethylation · Difluoromethylene · Cross-coupling · Transition metal

1. Introduction

Fluorine-containing organic compounds have received considerable attention in various fields during the last few decades. This is largely due to the unique chemical, physical, and biological properties introduced by fluorine, and these compounds have found widespread applications in material chemistry, medicinal industry, and life sciences. We have witnessed the rapid growth in the development of novel synthetic methodologies for the incorporation of fluorine or fluorine-containing moieties into organic molecules in recent years, among which, transition metal-mediated reactions play an important role because of the mild reaction conditions, diverse reaction formats, and high efficiency.

The perfluoroalkylation (especially trifluoromethylation) of organic substrates involving transition metals have been extensively communicated and reviewed in past decades. However, the preparation of partially fluorinated compounds via fluoralkylation has been far less developed although they are equally important as the perfluorinated ones in many fields. Aromatics with a difluoromethylene group (ArCF₂R, R ≠ F, R₂) are of significant utility. For instance, a difluoromethylene motif (CF₂) can function as a bioisostere of oxygen with improved metabolic stability and oral bioavailability while the difluoromethyl group (CF₂H) is regarded as a lipophilic hydrogen bond donor with excellent bioactivity. Recently, the synthesis of difluoromethylated arenes and derivatives assisted by transition metals has experienced a revival of interest. Inspired by the latest progress that has been achieved, we present a brief review on this topic from both synthetic and mechanistic perspectives.

2. General Information

Conventional methods for the preparation of difluoromethylene moieties include the deoxygenation of the carbonyl group with sulfur tetrafluorides (SF₄), N,N-diethylaminosulfur trifluoride (DAST) and its derivatives. The intrinsic limitations of these reagents, such as toxicity, narrow functional group-tolerance, and high cost, have restricted their widespread application. On the other hand, transition metal-mediated cross-coupling provides an alternative solution to the introduction of difluoromethylene moieties to arenes. Generally, there are three main categories of approaches that lead to carbon(sp²)–carbon(sp²) bond formation with transition metals: i) the reductive cross-coupling of two electrophiles with metal powder (Strategy A, Scheme 1), ii) the mediation of an electrophile with a nucleophile (Strategies B & C, Scheme 1), and iii) the mainly oxidative coupling of two nucleophiles (Strategy D, Scheme 1). Copper, which is well-documented for promoting the Ullmann-type reaction, has been one of the most extensively employed metals in the cross-coupling reactions of the difluoromethylene motifs with aromatic groups via these four strategies. Recently, palladium and cobalt have also been studied that exhibit different reactivity relative to copper. All these metals (Cu, Pd, and Co) will be discussed in Sections 3-5 respectively.

![Scheme 1. Typical protocols for transition-metal-mediated difluoromethylation reactions.](image-url)
3. Copper-mediated Cross-coupling

The coupling of perfluoroalkyl iodides with aryl halides in the presence of stoichiometric amounts of copper powder was first reported by McLaughlin et al. in 1969. The reaction is believed to proceed via a ‘R-Cu’ species as the key intermediate and has been widely applied in the perfluoralkylation and trifluoromethylation of sp² carbon derivatives. The corresponding aryl and alkylalkoxy-carbonyldifluoromethylsilylfluoroacetate (ICF₂CO₂Me) was reported by the Kobayashi group in 1986 (Scheme 2). The reaction of ICF₂CO₂Me with copper was found to be complete within 30–45 min in DMSO giving a relatively stable ICF₂CO₂Me species at room temperature. Reactions using aryl, alkenyl, alkyl, benzylic, and allylic iodides run smoothly at room temperature, but heating was needed for bromine electrophiles. It is noteworthy that even alkyl iodide could be converted with the assistance of HMPA. Moreover, this transformation was trans stereospecific for alkyl iodides, which excluded the possibility of radical addition to double bond. In 2004, Sato et al. reinvigated this reaction with bromodifluoroacetate [BrCF₂CO₂Et] as the aryl iodide substrates, moderate yields were obtained after reaction in DMSO for hours at 55 °C.

Hu and coworkers’ investigations on the copper-mediated reaction between aryl iodide and iododifluoracetamides revealed the coexistence of three types of transformations: cross-coupling, intramolecular cyclization, and homocoupling (Scheme 3). By tuning the substituents on the nitrogen atom, the selectivity was adjustable. A plausible mechanism was proposed based on their observations that implied the involvement of a single electron transfer (SET) process leading to the formation of ‘RCF₂-Cu’.

The Burton group and the Shibuya group found that the (diethoxyphosphoryl)difluoromethyldifluoromethylcopper complex, obtained via the transmetalation of [(diethoxyphosphoryl)difluoromethyl] zinc bromide reagent with stoichiometric amounts of cuprous bromide (CuBr), was unstable at room temperature and spontaneously decomposed within days. It should be noted that the decomposition process in DMF remarkably differs from that in monoglyme. In Burton’s publication, the aryl difluoromethylated phosphonates were obtained by the cross-coupling of [(diethoxyphosphoryl)difluoromethyl] cadmium reagent with aryl iodides promoted by stoichiometric amounts of cuprous chloride (CuCl). The protocol exhibited excellent functional group tolerance, such as nitro, ester, and halides (Br and Cl) with high efficiency. Shibuya et al. developed a similar transformation with [(diethoxyphosphoryl)difluoromethyl] zinc reagent in place of the more toxic cadmium reagent. The reaction was conducted under the assistance of ultrasound and afforded lower output relative to the former case (Scheme 4).

Inspired by Shibuya’s work, Zhang and coworkers realized the first catalytic version of copper-mediated cross-coupling of iodobenzonitriles with bromozincodifluorophosphonate (Scheme 5). For substrates with an ortho-carboxylate ester as directing group, high efficiency and excellent functional group compatibilities were achieved. They declared that both ethereal solvent and catalytic amount of 1,10-phenanthroline are crucial to prevent the decomposition of the corresponding organocopper intermediate. Finally, the SET process was excluded and a plausible catalytic cycle involving Cu(III) was postulated on the basis of radical scavenging experiments. The concept of oxidative trifluoromethylation promoted by copper was first introduced by Qing and coworkers. Utilizing aromatic nucleophiles like boronic acid can broaden the scope of the cross-coupling reaction with diverse functional groups. Recently, they successfully applied this strategy to the cross-coupling of aryl boronic acid with 2-silyldifluoromethylphosphonates. The substrate scope was good while the yield was moderate; however, stoichiometric amounts of both copper and silver salts were needed.

Difluoromethylated aromatic compounds have received significant interest for the design and development of bioactive agents. Preliminary studies from the Burton group indicated that the difluoromethylcopper species (HCF₂Cu) lacks thermal stability above room temperature and decomposed rapidly to HCF₂CF₂H and cis-CF₂HCF₂H. Deriving from HCF₂Cu, such as a HCF₂Cu reagent reacted smoothly with electrophiles such as allylic, propargyl, and alkyl halides.
glylic, alkynyl, and benzyl halides; however, the direct difluoromethylation of aromatic halides was not mentioned. Alternative approaches to difluoromethylated aromatic compounds involved two-step strategies: i) the introduction of a functionalized difluoromethylenegroup onto the aromatic ring, and ii) removing the functional group to afford the target molecules. Sulfone is a readily removable functionality and has been widely utilized in synthetic chemistry. In 2011, a (phenylsulfonyl)difluoromethylenecopper (PhSO₂CF₂Cu) species was prepared by Hu et al. However, this species possessed poor thermal stability and low reactivity similar to those of HCF₂Cu and its coupling with aryl electrophiles was unsuccessful.

In 2011, Amii et al. described an efficient route leading to difluoromethylated aromatic compounds. The cross-coupling of aryl iodides with α-silyldifluoroacetate (TMS-CF₂CO₂Et) promoted by stoichiometric amount of cuprous iodide resulted in aryl difluoroacetates in high yields. These products were further hydrolyzed with the treatment of K₂CO₃/MEOH/H₂O followed by decarboxylation (KF/DMF, above 170 °C) to release the difluoromethyl motif. Reagent TMS-CH₂CO₂Et is stable and readily accessible from trifluoroacetate. The catalytic version of the cross-coupling step was further demonstrated to give moderate yield by employing 20% Cu(I) (Scheme 6).

Recently, the Hartwig group and the Prakash group have independently made extraordinary breakthroughs in the field of copper-mediated direct difluoromethylation of aryl iodides with different difluoromethyl sources (Scheme 7). Fier and Hartwig reported that electron-rich aryl iodides could be difluoromethylated with 5.0equiv of trimethylsilyldifluoromethane (TMS-CH₂F) and stoichiometric amount of Cu at 120 °C, while Prakash et al. found that both electron-deficient aryl and heteroaryl iodides could be difluoromethylated with no more than 3.0 equiv of tributyldifluoromethylstannane and 1.3 equiv of CuI at 100–120 °C. According to Hartwig’s experiments, either electron-deficient substrates or exogenous 1,10-phenanthroline ligands would result in hydrodehalogenation reaction. Since the HCF₂Cu species was proved unstable and has not been observed, they tentatively provided a rationalization that [(HCF₂)₂Cu] acted as a stable reservoir for HCF₂Cu. The possibility of a radical process of Cu(I) intermediate was excluded, but further study on the mechanism is needed. On the basis of both theoretical calculations and experimental methods, Prakash and coworkers postulated Cu(I) as a key reactive intermediate, which differs from the former case.

### Scheme 5. Copper-catalyzed synthesis of aryldifluorophosphinates.

### Scheme 6. A sequential copper-promoted multi-step synthesis of difluoromethylated arenes.

### Scheme 7. Copper-mediated direct difluoromethylation of aryl iodides.

#### 4. Palladium-mediated Cross-coupling

Generally, C–Pd(II) bond is more stable than the C–Cu(I) bond and, as a consequence, less reactive. For instance, the trifluoromethylation of aryl iodides involving CuCF₂, species undergoes smoothly even at room temperature while a similar transformation involving Pd(II)CF₂ species must be assisted by bulky ligands. In this context, the palladium-promoted incorporation of the difluoromethylene motif into aromatics has not been fully investigated in recent years. Magnesium-promoted selective defluorination of aryl trifluoromethyl ketones provide a straightforward approach to difluoroeno silylethers. In 2007, Shreeve and Guo reported the first palladium-promoted direct difluoromethylation of aryl iodides.
dium-catalyzed cross-coupling reactions of difluoroenol silyl ethers with aryl bromide.\textsuperscript{[23]} Comparison of the relative reaction rate of substituted silyl enol ethers in Pd-catalyzed cross-coupling with bromobenzene indicated fluorne substitution did not significantly reduce the reactivity of silyl enol ethers. Such a base-free reaction exhibited excellent functional group compatibility such as cyano, nitro, ester, and carbonyl.

The involvement of toxic tributyltin fluoride retarded the wide application of Shreve's method despite its efficiency and functional group compatibility. Based on Qing's results, Hartwig et al. recently reported a more general procedure for the synthesis of α-aryl-α,α-difluoroketones by the palladium-catalyzed coupling of α,α-difluoroacetophenones with aryl halides (Scheme 8).\textsuperscript{[24b]} For convenience, they prepared a single-component palladacyclic complex containing P(Cr-Bu)\textsubscript{3} Cy as dative ligand. A range of functionalities were tolerated under these reaction conditions. It is noteworthy that both aryl bromide and aryl chloride could be efficiently transformed with low catalyst loading even in large scale. Intriguingly, the base-induced cleavage of the α-aryl-α,α-difluoroketone products to give difluoromethylenes was observed. Further optimization, a one-pot procedure for the synthesis difluoromethylenes α,α-difluoroacetophenones and aryl halides was realized. Since the second step was conducted with KOH in H\textsubscript{2}O at 100 °C, the functional group compatibility was excellent. Ethers, thioethers, esters, ketones, carbonate moieties, amino groups, silyl groups and quinolone derivatives were tolerated with high overall yield.

As a continuing effort in the field of cross-coupling reaction with functionalized difluoromethane groups, Zhang et al. reported their recent study on the synthesis of aryldifluoromethylated phosphonates and carboxylic derivatives catalyzed by palladium (Scheme 9).\textsuperscript{[25]} Unlike the copper catalytic system with restricted substrate scope, the current reaction conditions were applicable to both bromodifluoromethylphosphonate and bromodifluoracetaete. To demonstrate its utility in medicinal chemistry, the authors applied their methodology to the synthesis of a protected protein phosphotyroine phosphatase (PTPase) inhibitor and modification of a natural product. Radical-inhibition detection experiments suggested that a SET pathway via the difluoromethylenephosphonate radical may be involved in the catalytic cycle.

In 1995, the Shi group investigated the cross-coupling of nucleophiles with 1,1-difluoroallylpalladium complexes generated from 1,1-difluoroallyl acetates.\textsuperscript{[26a]}

The Kirihara group also investigated the similar nucleophilic substitution by using 3-bromo-3,3-difluoropropene (BDFP) and its derivatives in the presence of palladium catalyst.\textsuperscript{[26b]} These two groups' studies indicated that the regioselectivity (α or γ substituted product) has a direct relationship with both the hard-soft nature of the nucleophiles and the steric hindrances. In the latest report by Zhang, aryl borons were applied into the cross-coupling with BDFP (Scheme 10).\textsuperscript{[26b]}

This gem-difluoroallylation reaction exhibited excellent α' regioselectivity under mild reaction conditions. Catalyst loading could be reduced to 0.01% without significant loss of reactivity when the reaction was conducted on 10.0 mg scale. Arylboronic ester and aryl trifluoroborate salt were also examined under these reaction conditions and exhibited comparable reactivity. The synthetic application of this
protocol was demonstrated with the gem-fluorallylation of bioactive natural products followed by further functionalization of the C-C double bond.

Similar to that of the ‘RCF₅C≡(O)’ species [R = H, C(O)Ar, CO₂Et, (C≡O)NR₂, PO(OEt)₂], the substituents R have a subtle impact on the stability and reactivity of ‘RCF₅Pd(n)’ (Scheme 11). This kind of substitution effect can be crucial for the success of corresponding cross-coupling reactions. Although the cross-coupling of functionalized ‘RCF₅Pd(n)’ species [R = C(O)Ar, CO₂Et, (C≡O)NR₂, PO(OEt)₂] with aryl substrates have been reported, the direct difluoroacetylation and difluoroalkylation of aren derivatives involving ‘RCF₅Pd(n)’ (R = H, alkyl) species is expected to be more challenging and has not yet been disclosed.

5. Cobalt-mediated Cross-coupling

Cobalt exhibits different reactivity in cross-coupling reactions relative to palladium, nickel, and copper. Typically, a SET mechanism is involved in the cobalt-catalyzed coupling of alkyl, alkenyl, and aryl halides with Grignard reagents or organozine nucleophiles. In 2013, Inoue and coworkers disclosed a cobalt-catalyzed cross-coupling reaction of arylzinc reagents with bromodifluoroacetate (Scheme 11). Compared to the corresponding Grignard reagents that might cause the boron-magnesium exchange back reaction, the TMEDA-ligated zinc nucleophiles were mild for manipulation giving acceptable yields with good tolerance of functionalities, such as bromine, chlorine, ester, methoxy, and methylthio groups.

6. Conclusions and Perspectives

There are two features that distinguish the chemistry of RCF₅M (R ≠ F, Rᵢ) from that of CF₅M: i) the C–M bond in RCF₅M is weaker than that of CF₅M. This trend has been confirmed by the reduced thermal stability of RCF₅Cu species compared to CF₅Cu. ii) The substituents ‘R’ play a crucial role in tuning the reactivity of RCF₅M species, which is still not fully understood. These features make cross-coupling involving RCF₅M species even more complicated. Transition metals currently involved are restricted to copper and palladium while other environmentally benign sources like iron have not been examined. On the other hand, although other strategies including a radical process for the difluoroacetylation of heteroarenes have also been reported, methods for the incorporation of difluoroacetylbenzene building blocks to aromatics are far from common. With regard to electrophiles, the cheapest alkyl chlorides are still unreactive in most reaction systems. Moreover, control of the site selectivity on the aromatic ring is another issue that must be addressed for an efficient transformation. Some of these cross-coupling reactions have been extended to other systems such as alkanyl, alkallyl, allylic, benzylic, and propargyl halides. Further efforts for the incorporation of difluoroacetylene motifs into alkyl terminals with transition metals would be another important aspect in synthetic chemistry.

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