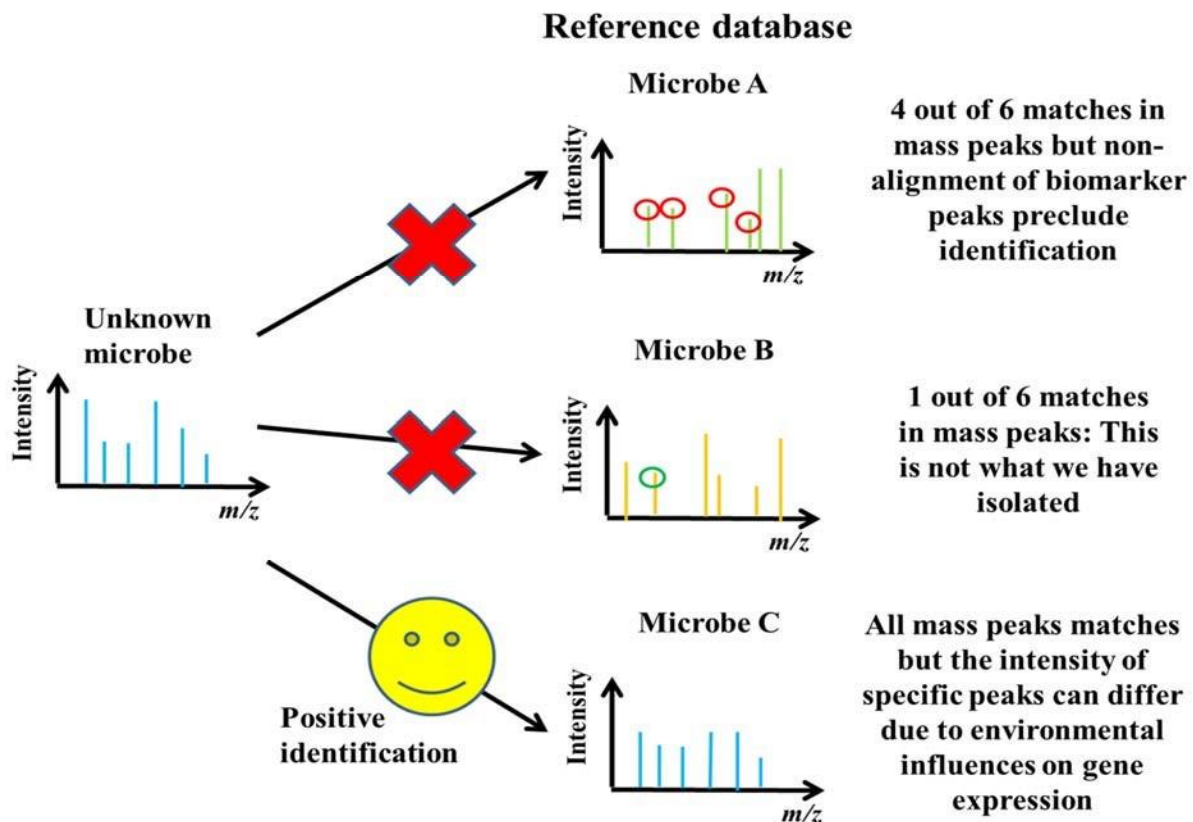


Graphical illustration for explaining mass spectrum fingerprinting in microbial identification

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Abstract

Pattern recognition is commonly used for identifying an unknown entity from a set of known objects curated in a database, and find use in various applications such as fingerprint matching and microbial identification. Mass spectrometry is increasingly used in identifying microbes in the research and clinical settings via species- or strain-specific mass spectrum signatures. Although the existence of unique biomarkers (such as ribosomal proteins) underpins mass spectrometry-based microbial identification, absence of corresponding genome or proteome information in public databases for a large fraction of extant microbes significantly hamper biomarker (and species) assignment. However, the reproducible generation of species-specific mass spectrum across different growth and environmental conditions opens up the possibility of

identifying unknown microbes, without biomarker identities, via comparing peak positions between mass spectra. Thus, the mass spectrum fingerprinting (pattern recognition) approach circumvents the need for biomarker information, where alignment of as many mass peaks as possible (particularly, those of phylogenetic significance) between spectra is the basis for identification. In contrast, variation in gene expression and metabolism with environmental and nutritional factors, meant that alignment of peak intensities, though desired, is not a strict requirement in species annotation. With large diversity of biomolecules present in each microbial species, mass spectrometry-based microbial identification is inherently data-intensive, which necessitates statistical tools and computers for implementation. However, relegation of algorithmic details to the backend of software obfuscates the approach's conceptual underpinnings and hinders understanding. More importantly, mathematics-centric approaches for explaining the conceptual basis of pattern recognition, though useful, are generally less pedagogically accessible to students relative to visual illustration techniques. This short primer describes a simple graphical illustration that explains the conceptual underpinnings of mass spectrum fingerprinting, and highlights caveats for avoiding misidentifications, and may find use as a supplement in a microbiology or bioinformatics course for introducing the conceptual basis of pattern recognition based microbial identification by mass spectrometric analysis.

Keywords: profiling microbes, ribosomal proteins, biomarker, phylogeny, microbial ecology, taxonomy, bioinformatics, pattern recognition, MALDI-TOF MS, mass spectrum fingerprinting,

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Identifying an object by comparing it with other items is an intuitive method for determining similarity, which forms the basis for classifying the myriad objects around us along the continuum from totally different to similar and identical. In the same spirit, microbial identification initially relied on morphological and phenotypic characteristics such as cell shape, and types and colours of pigment secreted. Realization that the relatively small microbial morphological and phenotypic space severely constrains the identification of the vast diversity of extant microorganisms potentiates the development of biochemical, and more recently, nucleic acids methods (in particular, 16S rRNA gene sequencing) for identifying diverse microorganisms in the environment. Limitations such as long analysis time, complicated sample preparation, and possible bias in analysis, motivate the development of numerous alternative techniques for identifying microorganisms from myriad sample matrixes. One approach increasingly gaining acceptance, both in clinical diagnostics and research, is mass spectrometric profiling of cellular content of microbes where, subsequent annotation of mass spectra data with species-specific biomarkers affords identification.^{1 2} Specifically, the high sensitivity, low limits of detection and generic nature of mass spectrometry enable its use in identifying many microorganisms.

Matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization time of flight mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS) relies on the gentle ionization (i.e., without inducing fragmentation) of biomarker molecules such as ribosomal proteins in identifying an unknown microbe.² Specifically, by profiling the set of species-specific ribosomal proteins, and subsequently, comparing the mass spectra data (particularly, peak positions) with those curated in a reference database, positive identification of the unknown microbe is possible if a match (of high similarity) can be obtained. In particular, identification of microbes via MALDI-TOF MS is usually effected by the biomarker approach, where phylogenetically significant biomolecules such as ribosomal proteins serve as identifiers for particular species and strains. However, the lack of sufficient publicly available annotated genome information for a sizeable fraction of extant microbial species severely hampers the utility of biomarker-based microbial identification; a problem which may be alleviated in the future with greater accessibility of high throughput sequencing and proteomics techniques (at declining cost), and accompanying high accuracy automated functional annotation workflows.

An alternative approach, pattern recognition (or mass spectrum fingerprinting), is capable of analyzing the obtained mass spectra for identifying unknown microbial species without knowledge of the mass peaks' identities. Though simple in concept and amenable to be performed by visual observation for low-dimensional (i.e., small) datasets, the increasing prevalence of high dimensional datasets in microbial ecology studies necessitates the use of statistical techniques for determining the similarity between two entities. In essence, pattern recognition compares the mass spectra of the unknown microbe with those present in a curated reference database/library in search of a match, and positive identification. More specifically, by comparing the presence/absence of mass peaks of microbes cultivated and prepared under identical (or, at least similar conditions), pattern recognition identifies microbes through answering the similarity question at the aggregate level relative to the fine-grained biomolecule specific approach underlying biomarker-based methods. Taken together, pattern recognition abstracts the identification question from the individual biomarker to an aggregate consortium of mass peaks, and in doing so, negate the need for biomarker identities. The rest of this primer will focus on explaining the concept of pattern recognition in relation to MALDI-TOF MS microbial biotyping.

Genetic mutations potentiate divergence of species and strains as microorganisms adapt to different environmental and nutritional conditions. The functional role of ribosomal proteins as phylogenetic chronometers accrues to their high conservation across species, given their important roles as constituents of the ribosome. Thus, with evolutionary pressure negatively selecting for high mutation rates in ribosomal protein genes, they can serve as molecular chronometers cataloguing the gradual accumulation of mutations, which helps differentiate organisms at the species and strain level. The observed small differences in ribosomal protein sequences between strains and species are, however, sufficient to translate into mass differences resolvable by most

modern MALDI-TOF mass spectrometers. Thus, detecting small differences in peak positions (i.e., m/z ratio) often belonging to biomarker proteins constitutes the conceptual basis of mass spectrometry-based microbial biotyping.

Two important caveats hinder the use of a single biomarker for unique identification. Specifically, identification of microorganisms via detecting a single ribosomal protein is practically impossible since specific ribosomal proteins share a high degree of similarity between and within species. Additionally, silent mutations do not manifest as changes in amino acid sequences and detectable mass differences; thus, obviating their use in cataloguing the sequence divergence between microorganisms. In contrast, MALDI-TOF MS circumvents the aforementioned conundrum by performing a wide spectrum “scan” over the entire range of m/z ratios within the instrument’s operating window for yielding a biomolecule mass spectrum fingerprint of a particular microbe. Such a mass spectrum fingerprint typically captures a large fraction (though not all) of biomolecules present, especially those with abundances significantly above the mass spectrometer’s detection limits. Given the importance of ribosomal proteins in overall cellular function, their high relative abundance meant that they are usually more prevalent and distinguishable, which helps anchor their use in mass spectrometry-based biotyping. Thus, by aggregating over the multitude of different ribosomal proteins present in each microbe, sufficient number of ribosomal proteins would likely exhibit mass differences with their counterparts in another microorganism that, as a holistic set, helps differentiate one species from another. Viewed from another perspective, each microbial species generates a unique mass spectrum fingerprint comprising species-specific ribosomal proteins and other common peaks. Collectively, by comparing mass spectra (i.e., position and number of mass peaks), the pattern recognition approach is theoretically capable of identifying an unknown microbe.

MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry-based microbial identification generates large datasets, and automation is the only feasible approach for implementing pattern recognition in analyzing the large number of mass spectra obtained. However, analysis delegated to the computer does not mean students should view them as black boxes. Thus, using a simple conceptual diagram, the present primer attempts to explain the concepts underlying pattern recognition based MALDI-TOF MS microbial biotyping.

Example illustrating the conceptual basis of pattern recognition

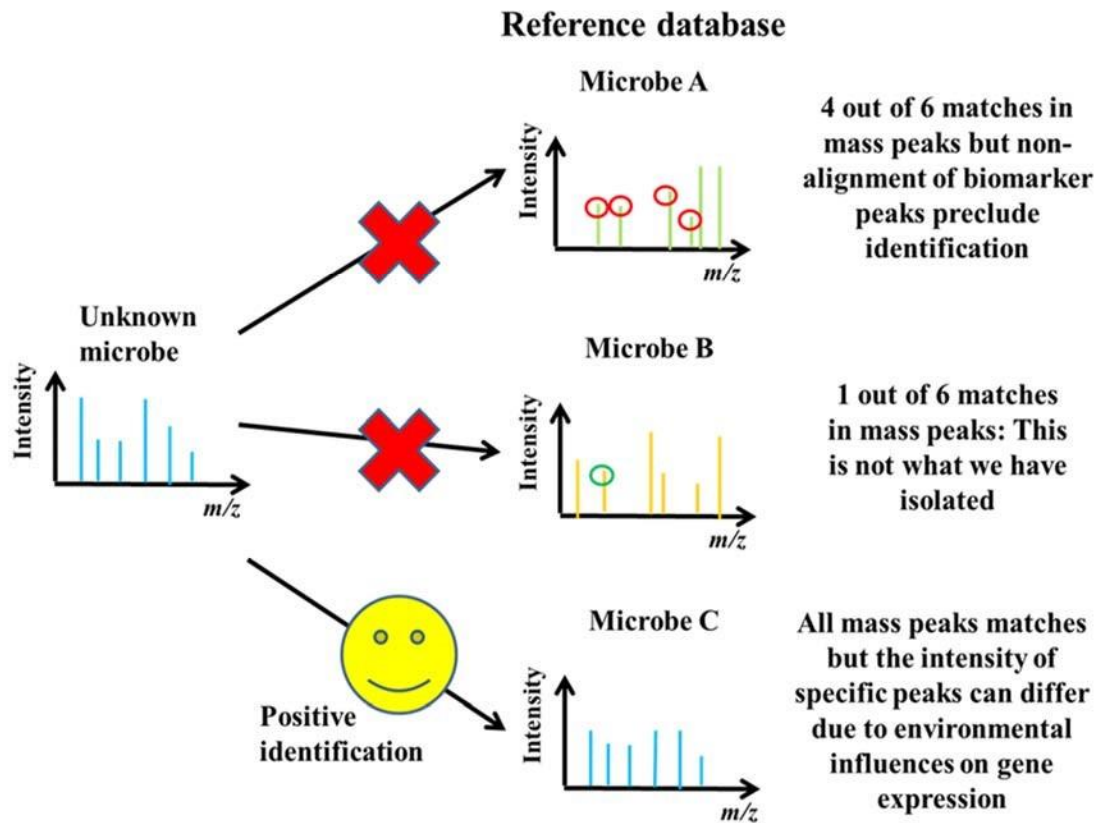


Figure 1: Graphical illustration explaining the conceptual basis of pattern recognition in mass spectrometry-based microbial identification with three examples that cover the range of scenarios typical of MALDI-TOF MS microbial biotyping workflows.

The ideal case of positively identifying a microorganism is complete 100% match in all peak positions between the mass spectra of the unknown and curated microbe. As depicted in the graphic (Figure 1), such cases are rare since fluctuations in environmental and nutritional conditions would likely alter gene expression patterns and cell metabolism that, in turn, manifests as the presence/absence of specific mass peaks of metabolites or proteins. Thus, the key criterion for positive identification lies in the close matching of as many biomarker peaks (especially those of ribosomal proteins) as possible, since biomarker peaks are given a greater weightage during calculation of the similarity score. For instance, in the example depicted, although 4 out of 6 peaks matches between the mass spectra of the unknown and microbe A, the poor alignment of the biomarker peaks (not explicitly shown) preclude identification. More importantly, why isn't a 67% match in number of mass peaks sufficient for positive identification? The answer lies in the high probability that various common or housekeeping proteins and metabolites may be accounting for a significant fraction of mass peaks matches, which given their prevalence in a

large fraction of species and strains, are not unique microbial species or strain identifiers. It was mentioned earlier that the pattern recognition approach is capable of identifying microbes without biomarker identities; thus, in the example above, how do we know that there is no biomarker match? Given the unique role of ribosomal proteins as phylogenetic markers, microbial biotyping via MALDI-TOF MS essentially relies on this class of proteins for positive identification. Hence, with knowledge of the typical mass range of ribosomal proteins, a cursory scan of the obtained mass spectrum via the pattern recognition algorithm for ribosomal protein mass peak is possible. Specifically, there is no profiled ribosomal protein mass peak in the mass spectra of microbe A in the example above; a possible case if microbe A is a virus.

On the other hand, the matching of one peak between the mass spectra of the unknown and microbe B rules out the possibility of a species identification, since even if the mass peak belongs to a ribosomal protein, common occurrence of ribosomal protein of identical amino acid sequence across a variety of microbial species precludes the positive identification of a microbe based on a single ribosomal protein match. In the final case, even though some of the peak intensities between the mass spectra of the unknown and microbe C are dissimilar, the close matching of all peak positions in the two mass spectra is sufficiently robust for positive identification. Though peak intensity offers a second dimension of information potentially useful in microbial identification, practical use of peak height (intensity) for microbial identification is limited given that biomolecule abundance (peak intensity) fluctuates depending on the extent in which various nutritional and environmental factors influence cell physiology, metabolism and gene expression. Thus, only in extremely rare cases would there be perfect match in both peak intensity and peak position between two mass spectra, which is an idealized case that may not be realized even if there is close matching of various sample preparation, instrument analysis, and cell cultivation conditions. In general, though potentially useful, peak intensity remains of secondary importance in microbial identification relative to peak position. Taken together, the guiding criterion for positive identification remains the close alignment of as many mass peaks of phylogenetic significance as possible.

Caveats for avoiding misidentifications

Though simple in concept and useful in identifying microbes from MALDI-TOF mass spectra data in the absence of supporting genomic and proteomic information, several caveats exist in using pattern recognition for microbial identification. Firstly, mass spectrum fingerprinting is a statistical approach. Specifically, given possible errors and problems with sample preparation etc., the ideal case of perfect match in all peak positions for important biomarker molecules such as ribosomal proteins does not exist in practical implementation of the

technique. Thus, a score is typically calculated to assess the similarity between two mass spectra, and an arbitrary threshold is used in discriminating between positive and negative identification. Use of an arbitrary threshold necessarily introduces an element of uncertainty in the analytical workflow, but the approach remains valid if the threshold used has been validated in studies covering a wide range of microbes profiled using different mass spectrometers.

Second, given myriad factors such as sample preparation, cell culture conditions, instrument calibration and maintenance, and even the type and make of the MALDI-TOF MS used have an impact on the quality of the mass spectra and mass peaks profiled, close similarity in instrument analysis conditions, sample preparation, and growth parameters of microbes are necessary for removing unwanted bias and reducing incidences of false-positives or false-negatives in identification.

Conclusions

Using a simple graphic depicting three examples typical of MALDI-TOF MS microbial typing, the present primer attempts to explain the conceptual basis of applying pattern recognition to mass spectrometry-based microbial identification. Specifically, close alignment of all mass peaks of phylogenetic significance between mass spectra, though desired, is not a practical possibility. However, the goal remains to align as many biomarker peaks as possible given their higher weightage in the similarity score used for determining identification. Additionally, while desirable, alignment of peak intensity of biomarkers between mass spectra is not a strict criterion for positive identification since various environmental and nutritional factors influence gene expression and cellular metabolism, which translates into differing abundance (peak height) of particular biomolecules even for the same species and strain. Finally, caveats important to avoiding misidentification, such as ensuring close similarity in sample preparation, instrumental analysis and culture conditions of the unknown and curated microbes, and the understanding that pattern recognition in general and mass spectrum fingerprinting in particular are statistical in nature are highlighted. In particular, the probabilistic nature of identifying microbes by pattern recognition meant that analysis of results obtained should take into account the uncertainty involved as well as any possible bias, both at the instrument analysis and sample preparation level. Collectively, the primer should be useful as a supplement to either a microbiology or bioinformatics course for helping students better understand the conceptual underpinnings of pattern recognition's utility in mass spectrometry-based microbial identification.

References

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New in this version

Language and logic flow was improved in this version. Updates to content were also made.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author's contribution

The author thought about the underlying principles and caveats of matrix assisted laser desorption/ionization time of flight mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS) microbial identification, and developed a simple graphical illustration to explain the underlying principles of mass spectrum fingerprinting in enabling mass spectrometry-based microbial identification. He wrote the primer to share with the community his views on the subject.

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