

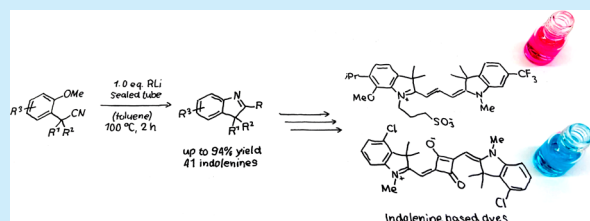
Preparation of Indolenines via Nucleophilic Aromatic Substitution

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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: An unusual aromatic substitution to access indolenines is described. 2-(2-Methoxyphenyl)acetonitrile derivatives are reacted with various alkyl and aryl Li reagents to furnish the corresponding indolenine products, constituents of natural products, and cyanine dyes such as indocyanine green. This new method was used to synthesize 41 indolenines with large functional group tolerance, and selected examples were further converted to the corresponding indolenine dyes. Key experiments provide insight into the mechanism of this nucleophilic aromatic substitution.



The indolenine or 3-*H*-indole structure can be found in many natural products (Figure 1) and is often used to access other indole derivatives such as the reduced indolines.¹

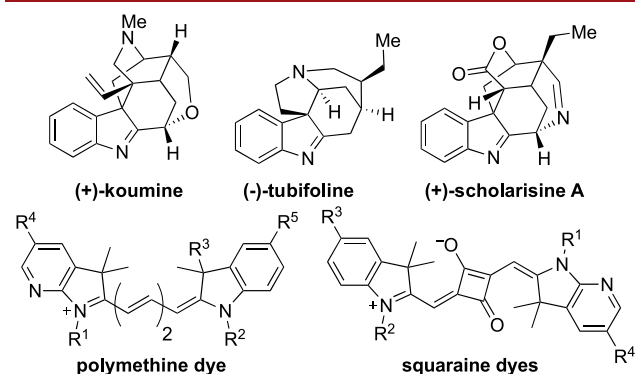
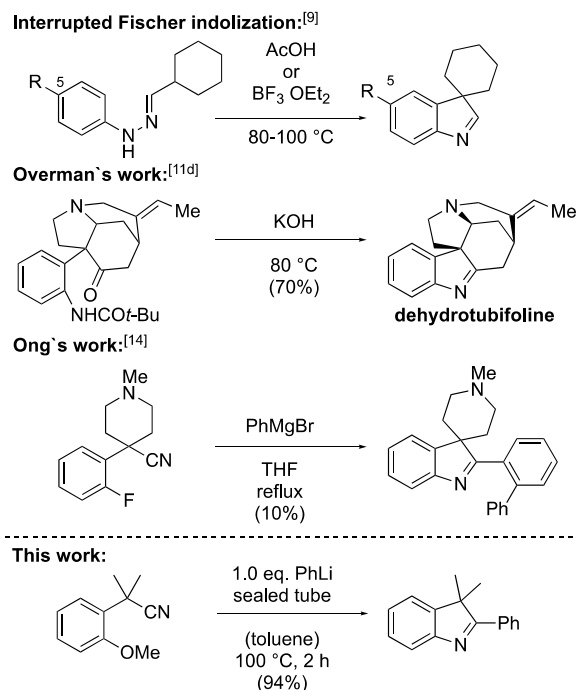


Figure 1. Indolenine-type natural products and indolenine-based dyes.

Besides their appearance in natural products and in indole synthesis, indolenines are also employed as precursors for various indolenine-based dyes like indocyanine green.² These dyes find applications in nonlinear optics,³ solar energy conversion,⁴ imaging of diseases,⁵ molecular sensors,⁶ and in vivo and ex vivo imaging.⁷ Recently, photochromic molecules or molecular photoswitches based on an indolenine core structure received significant interest in the fields of medicine and smart materials, due to their property of changing color upon light exposure.⁸ For the synthesis of the indolenine scaffold, there are numerous methods (Scheme 1) reported in the literature,^{1e} which can be divided into three major groups: (1) interrupted Fischer indolization,⁹ (2) dearomatization of indoles,¹⁰ and (3) intramolecular condensation of an aniline derivative with a carbonyl species to form the C–N bond.¹¹ Among the different approaches, only the Fischer indolization is used for the synthesis of indolenine-based dyes, a result of

Scheme 1. Approaches Towards the Indolenine Structure

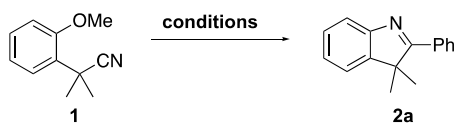


the availability of the starting materials. Although this method works well for a variety of indolenines, it is limited to substituents in the 5-position.¹² Otherwise, unsymmetrically substituted hydrazones result in low yields and product mixtures.¹³ The group of Ong published another approach toward indolenines starting from fluoronitriles.¹⁴ However, the indolenine could only be isolated in poor yields. A similar observation was reported by the group of Chiba, applying

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reductive conditions to the anisol analogs with a poor yield for the indolenine.¹⁵ During our work on benzyl nitriles, we serendipitously discovered their unique reactivity toward organolithium compounds. Upon treatment of 2-methoxyphenylacetonitrile (**1**) with phenyllithium, the formation of an indolenine was observed at higher temperatures. Intrigued by this discovery, the reaction was further optimized (Table 1).

Table 1. Optimization for the Indolenine Cyclization



entry ^a	PhLi (equiv)	T (°C)	time (h)	yield (%) ^b
1	1.2	80	1	71
2	1.5	80	1	26
3	1.0	80	1	90
4	1.0	60	1	51
5	1.0	100	1	93
6	1.0	120	1	93
7 ^c	1.0	100	2	94
8 ^d	1.0	100	2	90
9	1.0	100	4	91
10	1.0	100	18	92
11 ^e	1.0	100	2	82
12 ^f	1.0	100	2	0 ^g

^aGeneral conditions: sealed tube, 0.3 mmol nitrile, 3.0 mL toluene.

^bYield was determined by ¹H NMR with internal standard. ^cIsolated yield. ^d1 mmol scale. ^eTHF as solvent. ^fPhMgBr instead of PhLi.

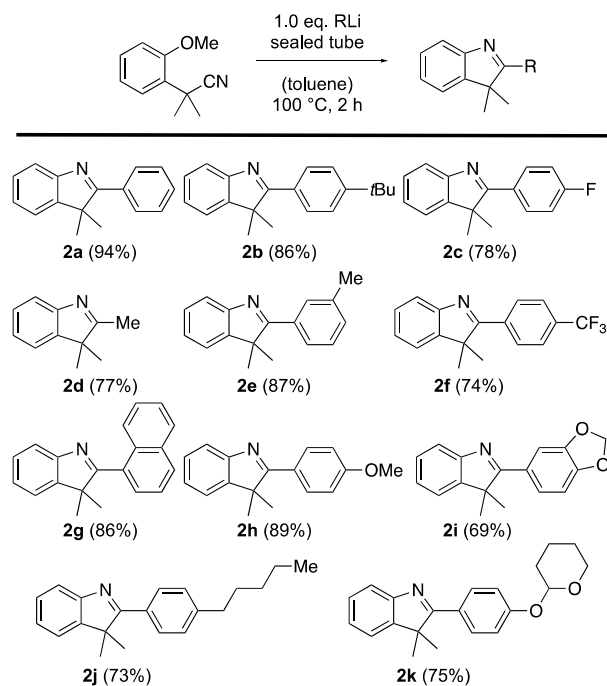
^gImine formation observed.

Equimolar amounts of phenyllithium gave the best results, whereas an excess of lithium reagent only lead to a lower yield for the indolenine (entries 1–3). Further optimization demonstrated that the ideal temperature is 100 °C, at which the reaction is completed after 2 h (entry 7). Longer reaction times only lead to lower yields (entries 9 and 10). Although THF constitutes a suitable solvent, the yield is higher for toluene. Exchanging phenyllithium with phenylmagnesium bromide gave the corresponding imine, and no formation of the indolenine could be observed (entry 12). Under the optimized conditions the desired indolenine **2a** was isolated in excellent 94% yield.

With an optimized procedure in hand, the possible modification of the organolithium reagent was investigated at first (Scheme 2). Various aryllithium reagents were employed for the cyclization, giving high yields independent from donor or acceptor substituents and the substitution pattern on the aryllithium. Fluorides and a tetrahydropyran-protected phenol did not have any effect on the cyclization and gave the indolenines in high yields. Fortunately, alkylolithium reagents such as methylolithium result in indolenine formation in good yield, which are ideal precursors for the synthesis of indolenine dyes.

Next the scope of the indolenine cyclization was evaluated (Scheme 3). The cyclization works well with donor substituents on the aromatic core. Furthermore, it is possible to install the methoxy substituents at every possible position on the aromatic ring in high yields. With the currently known methods, only compound **5** is accessible in good yields. As can be seen with indolenine **8**, the cyclization works well with a very electron-rich benzyl nitrile, delivering a highly substituted

Scheme 2. Variation of the Organolithium Reagent

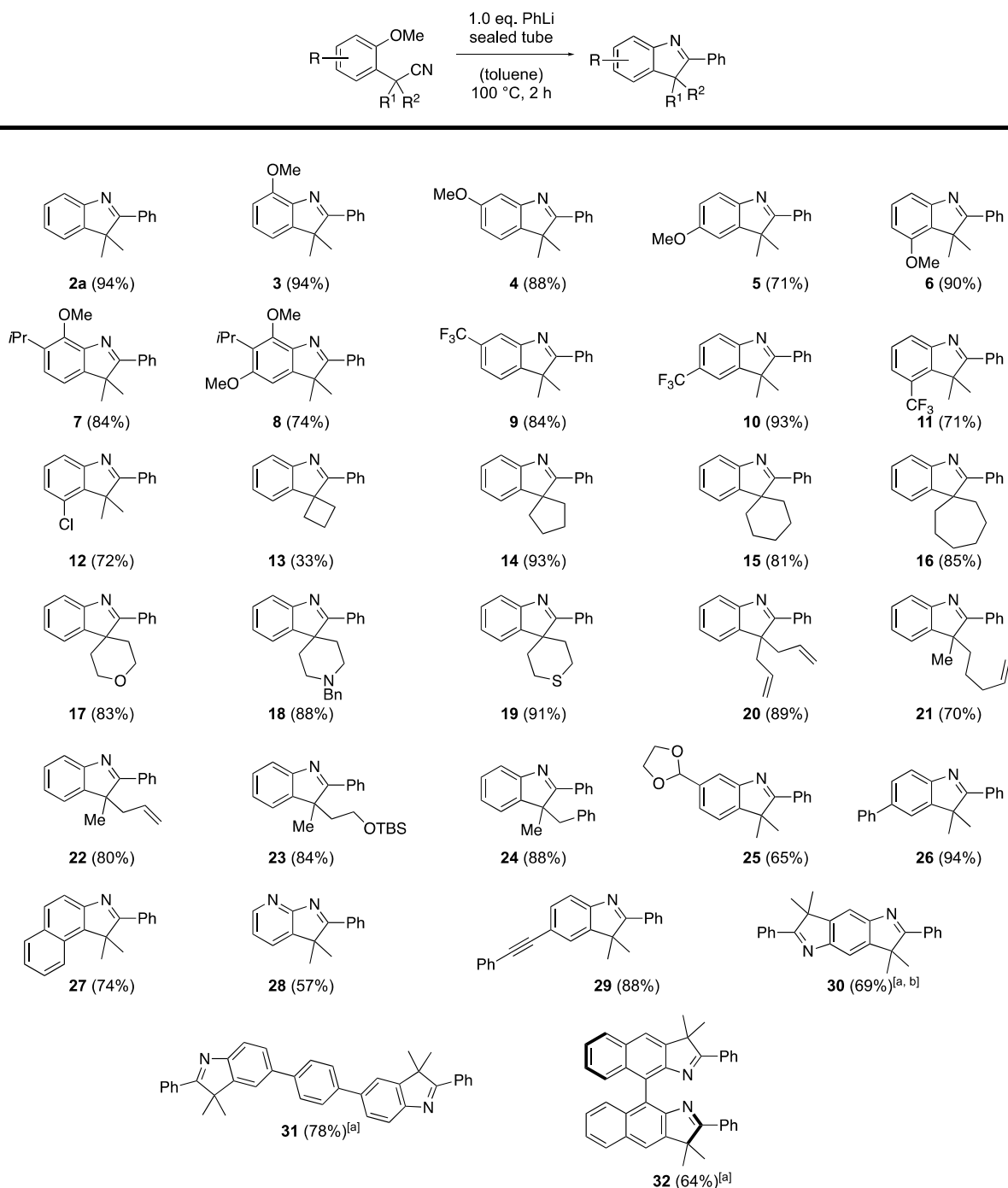


indolenine. Beside donor substituents, electron-withdrawing substituents are tolerated as well and give the corresponding indolenines in high yields. Surprisingly the cyclization method tolerates chloride substituents, giving access to further modifications. Next, the benzylic position was modified with various ring sizes, leading to the spiroindolenines. The 4-membered ring gave the indolenine in poor yields. All larger ring sizes delivered the cyclization product in very good yield. Oxygen-, nitrogen-, and sulfur-containing rings are tolerated and give the spiroindolenines in high yields. Unsymmetric substituted nitriles showed high yields for the cyclization, tolerating benzyl, allyl groups, and TBS-protected alcohols. Furthermore, various aryl substituents, an alkyne moiety, as well as an acetal-protected aldehyde did not affect the cyclization, showing the broad application of this method. The transfer of the cyclization method to the corresponding pyridynitriles gives access to azaindolenines, which are used as precursors for near-infrared fluorescent dyes (Figure 1).¹⁶ Through the cyclization of various dinitriles the cyclic bisindolenines were obtained in good yields. Bisindolenine **32** was synthesized starting from (*S*)-BINOL, and its use as a new ligand for metal catalysis is currently under investigation in our group.

Due to the unusual reactivity of the described transformation, the mechanism of the reaction was further investigated. It is well-known that nitriles react with organolithium reagents to form the corresponding imines.¹⁷ Imine **33** as a possible intermediate was treated with various bases (Scheme 4). Sodium hydride showed no formation of the indolenine. Switching from sodium hydride to the lithium base *tert*-butyllithium, a high yield for the indolenine was achieved. The weaker base LiHMDS gave similar results. This confirms the observation made during the optimization (Table 1), which underlines the crucial role of the Li counterion for the indolenine cyclization.

With these results in hand, a possible mechanism was proposed (Scheme 5). First the nitrile is attacked by

Scheme 3. Scope of the Indolenine Cyclization



^a2.0 equiv of PhLi. ^b4 h, 100 °C.

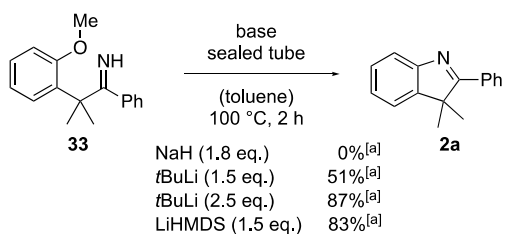
phenyllithium, and the intermediary imine is formed. Via coordination of the lithium cation with the imine and the aromatic oxygen the methoxy group is activated as a leaving group. This activation enables the intramolecular attack of the nitrogen to the aromatic system followed by the cleavage of lithium methoxide. Other pathways via an aryne or a radical intermediate appear rather unlikely. The allylic substrates **20** and **22** both formed the indolenine in a high yield, and no products resulting from a radical 5-*exo*-cyclization with the terminal double bond were observed. Furthermore, the

substrates **3** and **7** with substituents ortho to the methoxy group strongly disfavor an aryne-type mechanism.

As mentioned before, the main advantage of the Fischer indolization is the availability of the starting materials. The nitriles required for the indolenine cyclization either are accessible in one step from the corresponding arylfluorides via a nucleophilic aromatic substitution or are already commercially available.¹⁸

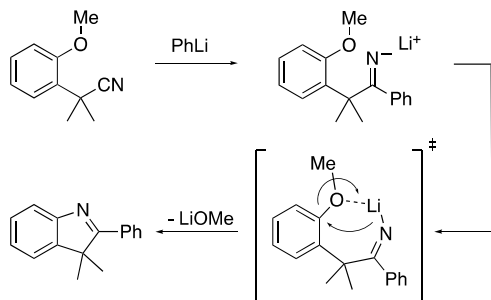
As an application of this new method, the synthesis of indolenine-based dyes was carried out.^{5b,19} Methylindolenines **34**, **36**, and **38** were prepared, employing the described

Scheme 4. Conversion of Imine 33 to Indolenine 2a with Various Bases

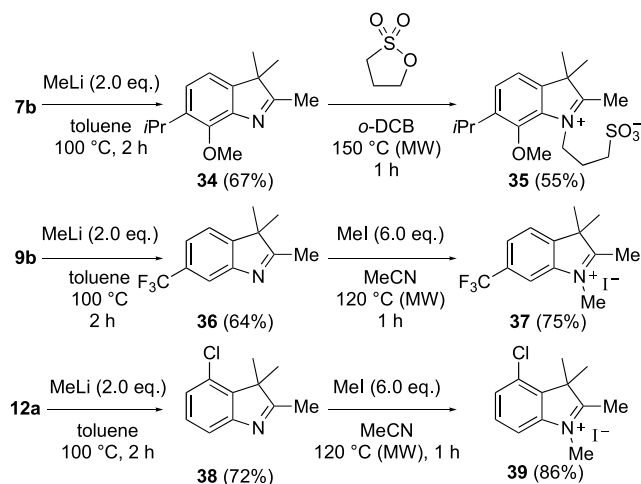


^aThe yield was determined with ¹H NMR and 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene as the internal standard.

Scheme 5. Possible Mechanism for the Indolenine Cyclization



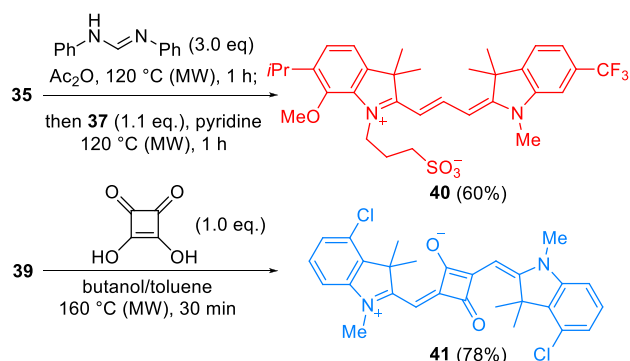
method in this work. The indolenines were further converted into the *N*-methyl iodine salts, except for indolenine 34, which was reacted with 1,3-propane sultone to sulfonate 35 (Scheme 6). The salts 35 and 37 were used to synthesize the

Scheme 6. Synthesis of Indolenine-Based Salts^a

^a*o*-DCB = 1,2-dichlorobenzene, MW = microwave.

nonsymmetric purple polymethine dye 40. Dye 40 exhibits a λ_{max} of 546 nm, and due to the sulfonate moiety it is soluble in water (Scheme 7). From iodine salt 39 the blue squaraine dye 41 was synthesized, which displays a λ_{max} of 632 nm. Both dyes have not been synthesized before and demonstrate the power of this new method, which allows the access to new and highly substituted indolenine-based dyes. The further application of this method in the field of indolenine-based dyes is currently under investigation.

Scheme 7. Synthesis of Indolenine-Based Polymethine Dye 40 and Squaraine Dye 41



In summary, a new method for the synthesis of indolenines based on an aromatic substitution was developed. The method tolerates a variety of substituents and gives high yields independent of the position of the substituents on the aromatic ring. Further modification of the lithium reagent allows access to a broader scope of indolenines. Mechanistic investigations suggest an aromatic substitution facilitated by Li reagents. Furthermore, three indolenines were used to access new indolenine-based dyes.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/acs.orglett.9b00489.

Detailed experimental procedures, analytical data, and ¹H NMR, ¹³C NMR, and ¹⁹F-NMR spectra (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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