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A highly selective colorimetric sensor for Hg²⁺ based on nitrophenyl-aminothiourea

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ABSTRACT

A simple and highly selective colorimetric sensor (L1) bearing thiosemicarbazide moiety as binding site and nitrophenyl moiety as signal group were synthesized. Sensor L1 showed great colorimetric single selectivity and high sensitivity for mercury cation in DMSO and DMSO/H₂O binary solutions. When Hg²⁺ was added to the DMSO solution of L1, dramatic color change from brown to colorless was observed. While the cations Ca²⁺, Mg²⁺, Cd²⁺, Fe³⁺, Co²⁺, Ni²⁺, Cu²⁺, Zn²⁺, Pb²⁺, Ag⁺ and Cr³⁺ could not cause any distinct interferer toward the recognition process for Hg^{2+} . The detection limit is allowable to 5.0×10^{-6} and 1.0×10^{-7} M level of Hg²⁺ according to visual color change and UV-vis change, respectively. The recognition mechanism of the sensor toward mercury cation was evaluated in DMSO solutions by UV-vis and ^TH NMR. The sensor selectively sense Hg^{2+} via the formation of a stable 1:1 complex through C=S and C=O group with Hg^{2+} . When these complex bonds formed, the sensor carried out an ICT transition induced color change.

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1. Introduction

Development of chemosensors for mercury cation (Hg²⁺) has received considerable attention because mercury has an extremely toxic impact on the environment and human health [1-4]. For example, mercury can lead to the dysfunction of the brain [3], kidney [5], and central nervous systems [6]. Therefore, the rational design and synthesis of efficient sensors to selectively recognize mercury cation is an important field of supramolecular chemistry [7–9]. Although previous work developed a wide variety of chemical [10-22] and physical [23,24] sensors for the detection of Hg^{2+} , so far, it is still a challenge to improvement of the detection selectivity in the context of interference from coexisting metal ions. Moreover, most of these methods require expensive equipment and involve time-consuming and laborious procedures that can be carried out only by trained professionals [23–25]. This will significantly restrict the practical applications of these Hg²⁺ sensors. For simplicity, convenience and low cost, the easily prepared Hg²⁺ colorimetric sensors [26,27] are highly demanding.

In view of these and as an attempt to obtain an efficient Hg²⁺ colorimetric sensor, we have designed and synthesized a Hg²⁺

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sensor L1 bearing thiosemicarbazide groups (Scheme 1). The strategies for design of the sensor are as follows. Firstly, we have introduced thiourea group as binding site. The C=S moiety on thiourea group possesses high affinity to Hg²⁺. Secondly, in order to achieve "naked-eve" recognition, we introduced nitrophenyl groups as the signal group. Finally, the sensor was designed to be easy to synthesize. In order to figure out the signal group's contribution to the Hg²⁺ sensing abilities of the sensor L1, compound L2 of analogue structure but without containing nitro-group were also synthesized. Interestingly, the sensor L1 could "naked-eye" recognize Hg²⁺ with high selectivity and sensitivity, other cations such as Ca²⁺, Mg²⁺, Cd²⁺, Fe³⁺, Co²⁺, Ni²⁺, Cu²⁺, Zn²⁺, Pb²⁺, Ag⁺ and Cr³⁺ could not cause any interference.

2. Experimental

2.1. Materials and physical methods

¹H NMR spectra were recorded with a Mercury-400BB spectrometer at 400 MHz. ¹H chemical shifts are reported in ppm downfield from tetramethylsilane (TMS, $\boldsymbol{\delta}$ scale with the solvent resonances as internal standards). UV-vis spectra were recorded on a Shimadzu UV-2550 spectrometer. Melting points were measured on an X-4 digital melting-point apparatus (uncorrected). The infrared spectra were performed on a Digilab FTS-3000 FT-IR spectrophotometer.

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Scheme 1. Synthetic procedures for sensors L1, L2.

The inorganic salts $Ca(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Mg(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Cd(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Fe(ClO_4)_3 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Co(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Ni(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Cu(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Zn(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 6H_2O$, $Pb(ClO_4)_2 \cdot 3H_2O$, $AgClO_4 \cdot H_2O$ and $Cr(ClO_4)_3 \cdot 6H_2O$ were purchased from Alfa Aesar Chemical Reagent Co. (Tianjin, China). All solvents and other reagents were of analytical grade.

2.2. General procedure for UV-vis experiments

All the UV–vis experiments were carried out in DMSO solution on a Shimadzu UV-2550 spectrometer. Any changes in the UV–vis spectra of the synthesized compound were recorded on addition of perchlorate metal salts while keeping the ligand concentration constant in all experiments.

2.3. General procedure for ¹H NMR experiments

For ¹H NMR titrations, two stock solutions were prepared in DMSO- d_6 , one of them containing host only and the second one containing an appropriate concentration of guest. Aliquots of the two solutions were mixed directly in NMR tubes.

2.4. Synthesis and characterization of sensors L1, L2

The synthetic procedure is shown in Scheme 1, ethyl chloroformate (3 mmol), dry and powdered NH₄SCN (4 mmol) and 0.06 mL TMEDA (N, N, N', N'-tetramethylethylenediamine, as catalyst) were added in dry dichloromethane (15 mL), the reaction mixture was stirred at room temperature for 2 h, then filtered out the inorganic salts, the filtrate is the solution of corresponding ethoxylcarbonyl isothiocyanate, which need not separate, added 2.8 mmol of (2,4dinitrophenyl)hydrazine into the filtrate solution and stirred it in room temperature for 3 h, yield the precipitate of L1. After evaporated the solvent in vacuum, the precipitate was filtrated, washed with 75% ethanol three times, then recrystallized with ethanol to get yellow crystal of L1. The other compounds L2 was prepared by the similar procedure.

L1: yield: 96.5%; m.p. 217–218 °C; ¹H NMR (DMSO- d_6 , 400 MHz) δ 11.39 (s, 2H, NH), 10.49 (s, 1H, NH), 8.88 (s, 1H, ArH), 8.36–8.33 (m, 1H, ArH), 7.23–7.21 (m, 1H, ArH), 4.21 (q, *J*=7.2, 2H, CH₂), 1.27 (t, 3H, CH₃); ¹³C NMR (DMSO- d_6 , 100 MHz) δ 181.02, 152.68, 147.41,

137.18, 129.89, 122.99, 116.09, 62.16, 14.18; IR (KBr, cm⁻¹) v: 3444 (mb, N–H), 3309 (m, N–H), 3188 (s, N–H), 1736 (s, C=O), 1618 (s, C=C), 1596 (s, C=C), 1556 (s, C=C), 1510 (s, C=C), 1212 (s, C=S); Anal. Calcd. for C₁₀H₁₁N₅O₆S: C, 36.47; H, 3.37; N, 21.27; Found: C, 36.51; H, 3.65; N, 21.54.

L2: yield: 85.4%; m.p. 149–150 °C; ¹H NMR (DMSO-*d*₆, 400 MHz) δ 11.17 (s, 2H, NH), 10.42 (s, 1H, NH), 8.14–8.08 (m, 2H, ArH), 7.38–7.15 (m, 2H, ArH), 6.80–6.72 (m, 1H, ArH), 4.17 (q, *J*=7.2, 2H, CH₂), 1.21 (t, 3H, CH₃); ¹³C NMR (DMSO-*d*₆, 100 MHz) δ 180.23, 153.01, 147.55, 128.80, 127.90, 122.39, 119.50, 112.84, 61.93, 14.18; IR (KBr, cm⁻¹) *v*: 3421 (mb, N–H), 3280 (s, N–H), 3168 (m, N–H), 1712 (s, C=O), 1602 (s, C=C), 1533 (s, C=C), 1492 (s, C=C), 1206 (s, C=S); Anal. Calcd. for C₁₀H₁₃N₃O₂S: C, 50.19; H, 5.48; N, 17.56; Found: C, 50.24; H, 5.25; N, 17.33.

3. Results and discussion

The colorimetric sensing abilities were primarily investigated by adding various cations Ca²⁺, Mg²⁺, Cd²⁺, Fe³⁺, Co²⁺, Ni²⁺, Cu²⁺, Hg^{2+} , Zn^{2+} , Pb^{2+} , Ag^+ and Cr^{3+} to the DMSO solutions of sensor L1 (Figs. 1 and 2). When adding 5 equiv. of Ca²⁺, Mg²⁺, Cd²⁺, Co²⁺, Ni²⁺, Zn²⁺, Pb²⁺, and Cr³⁺ to the solutions of sensor **L1** (2.0×10^{-5} M), respectively, no significant color or spectrum changes were observed. While, when adding 5 equiv. of Hg²⁺ to the solution of L1 (2.0×10^{-5} M), the sensor responded with dramatic color changes from brown to colorless (Fig. 1). In the corresponding UV-vis spectrum, the absorption at 470 nm disappeared (Fig. 2). When adding 5 equiv. of Cu²⁺, the DMSO solution of L1 showed color changes from brown to green, in the corresponding UV-vis spectrum, the absorption at 470 nm was shifted to 447 nm and a weak broad absorption peak appeared at 640 nm. Meanwhile, the addition of Ag⁺ and Fe³⁺ also lead to slight color and UV-vis spectrum changes. Even though sensors L1 showed colorimetric response toward Cu2+, Ag+ and Fe3+ in DMSO solutions, owing to only Hg²⁺ could bleaches the solution, the sensor L1 exhibited single selectivity for Hg²⁺.

The same tests were applied to **L2** with various cations. No obvious color changes were observed when any of the cations were added to the solutions of **L2** in same conditions. These results elucidated that nitrophenyl moiety acted as a signal group and played a crucial role in the process of colorimetric recognition.



Fig. 1. Color changes observed upon the addition of various cations (5 equiv) to the solutions of sensor L1 (2×10^{-5} M) in DMSO solutions. (For interpretation of references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)



Fig. 2. (a) UV-vis absorption spectrum and (b) UV-vis absorption at 470 nm of **L1** (2.0×10^{-5} M) in the presence of 5 equiv of various cations in DMSO solution at room temperature.

In biological and environmental systems, cation-sensor interactions commonly occur in aqueous solution, therefore, much attention has been paid to developing cation sensors that work in the aqueous phase. For these reasons, we investigated the cation recognition abilities of sensor **L1** in DMSO/H₂O binary solutions using UV–vis spectroscopy. We carried out the similar experiments in 9:1 DMSO/H₂O HEPES (10 mM) buffered solution at pH 7.40 for sensors **L1** (2.0×10^{-5} M). When adding 5 equiv. of Hg²⁺ to the 9:1 DMSO/H₂O HEPES buffered solution of **L1**, the sensor responded with dramatic color changes from brown to colorless, meanwhile, in the corresponding UV–vis spectrum, the absorption at 470 nm disappeared (Fig. 3). While other cations could not cause such distinct color and spectrum changes, therefore, sensor **L1** could colorimetric recognition Hg²⁺ in DMSO/H₂O binary solutions with special selectivity.

To gain an insight into the stoichiometry of the sensor L1-Hg²⁺ complex, the method of continuous variations (Job's plot) was used (Fig. 4a). As expected, when the molar fraction of sensor L1 was 0.50, the absorbance value approached a maximum, which demonstrated the formation of a 1:1 complex between sensor L1 and Hg^{2+} .

The further binding properties of sensor **3** toward Hg²⁺ were studied by UV–vis titration experiments (Fig. 4b). It turned out that in DMSO solution of **L1**, with increasing of Hg²⁺, the absorbance at 470 nm decreases while a new band appears at 401 nm. Such a blue shift led to the solution color changing from brown to colorless. Two clear isosbestic points are observed at 435 and 363 nm, which indicates the formation of **L1**-Hg²⁺ complex. By nonlinear least-squares fitting [28] at λ_{max} = 469 nm, the association constants Ka of the sensor **L1** toward Hg²⁺ was obtained as 6.04 × 10⁴ M⁻¹.



Fig. 3. UV-vis absorption spectrum of L1 (2.0 \times 10 $^{-5}$ M) in the presence of 5 equiv of various cations in 9:1 DMSO/H₂O HEPES (10 mM) buffered solution at pH 7.40, room temperature.

To further elucidate the binding mode of sensor **L1** with Hg^{2+} , ¹H NMR-titration spectra were measured, which illustrated the characteristic structural changes occurring upon interaction with Hg^{2+} in DMSO- d_6 solution. As shown in Fig. 5, there are two intramolecular hydrogen bonds in the molecular of **L1**, the one is N–H^b...O=C, the other is N–H^a...O=N. The formation of these hydrogen bonds



Fig. 4. (a) Job's plot of **L1** and Hg²⁺, which indicated the stoichiometry of **L1**-Hg²⁺ complex is 1:1. (b) UV–vis spectral titration of sensor **L1** with Hg²⁺ in DMSO solution. The non-linear fitting curve of change in absorbance of **L1** with respect to amounts of Hg²⁺ was shown in the inset.



Fig. 5. The proposed reaction mechanism of the sensor L1 with Hg²⁺.



Fig. 6. Partial ¹H NMR spectra of sensor **L1** (2.5 mM) in DMSO- d_6 upon the addition of Hg²⁺. (a) Free **L1**, after adding (b) 0.1, (c) 0.2, (d) 0.5, (e) 0.7, (f) 0.9 and (g) 1 equiv of Hg²⁺.

leads to the ¹H NMR chemical shifts of N—H^a and N—H^b appeared at low-field. Owing the N—H^b...O=C is a very stronger intramolecular hydrogen bond, [29–34] as shown in Fig. 6, the ¹H NMR chemical shifts of N—H^b appeared at the lowest field of the molecular of **L1** at δ 11.39 ppm, which overlap the proton signal of N—H^c. While the ¹H NMR chemical shifts of N—H^a appeared at δ 10.49 ppm. After the addition of 0.2 equiv. of Hg²⁺, a transition-state was formed between **L1** and Hg²⁺(Fig. 5), which induced the ¹H NMR chemical shifts of the N—H^a, N—H^b and N—H^c appeared as two very broad peaks. For the same reason, the proton signals of N—H^e and

N–H^f shifted downfield and broadened (Fig. 6). With the continuous addition of Hg²⁺, as shown in Fig. 5, the molecule structure carried out an intramolecular rotation, which induced the rupture of N–H^b...O...C and N–H^a...O=N, simultaneously, the interactions between the Hg²⁺...H^e–C and Hg²⁺...H^f–C were interrupted also. As a result, the stable Hg^{2+} -L1 1: 1 complex formed by the coordinate of Hg²⁺ with S=C and O=C groups on L1, however, the rupture of the hydrogen bonds lead to the signals of N-H^b and N-H^a moved up field (Fig. 6d-f), on the other hand, owing to the interactions between the $Hg^{2+}...H^e-C$ and $Hg^{2+}...H^f-C$ were interrupted, the signals of $C-H^e$ and $C-H^f$ backed to the original location (Fig. 6d-f). Along with these processes, the intramolecular charge-transfer (ICT) transition was interrupted, which induced a blue-shift in UV-vis spectrum and depigmentation of L1. Namely, before all the 1 equiv. of Hg²⁺ was added, the transition-state and the stable Hg²⁺-L1 complex coexisted in the solution, therefore, every proton signals of N-H^a, N-H^b, N-H^c, C-H^e and C-H^f displayed two signals, for the transition-state and the stable Hg²⁺-L1 complex state, respectively (Fig. 6d–**f**). After 1 equiv. of Hg^{2+} had been added, the transition-state completely changed into stable Hg²⁺-L1 complex, accordingly, in the whole titration process, the signals of N–H^c, N–H^b and N–H^a shifted to δ 11.22, 10.49 and 10.23 ppm respectively and the proton signals of C-H^e and C-H^f backed to the original position (Fig. 6g). In summary, according to the ¹H NMR-titration experiments, the Hg²⁺ and L1 formed a stable 1: 1 complex by the coordinate of Hg²⁺ with S=C and O=C groups on L1.



Fig. 7. UV-vis absorbance (a) and photographs (b) of sensor L1 (2.0×10^{-5} M) in DMSO solutions in the presence of Hg²⁺ (5 equiv) and miscellaneous cations including Ca²⁺, Mg²⁺, Cd²⁺, Fe³⁺, Co²⁺, Ni²⁺, Cu²⁺, Zn²⁺, Pb²⁺, Ag⁺ and Cr³ (5 equiv, respectively, at 470 nm).



Fig. 8. Color changes observed upon the addition of 5 equiv. of Hg^{2+} to the solutions of sensor **L1** (from right to left 1×10^{-4} M, 1×10^{-5} M, 1×10^{-6} M) in DMSO solutions. (For interpretation of references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

An important feature of the sensor is its high selectivity toward analyte over other competitive species. Variations of UV–vis spectral and visual color changes of sensor L1 in DMSO solutions caused by miscellaneous metal ions including Ca^{2+} , Mg^{2+} , Cd^{2+} , Fe^{3+} , Co^{2+} , Ni^{2+} , Cu^{2+} , Zn^{2+} , Pb^{2+} , Ag^+ and Cr^{3+} are recorded in Fig. 7. It is noticeable that the miscellaneous competitive metal ions did not lead to any significant spectral change: in the presence of these metal ions, the Hg²⁺ still resulted in the similar absorption changes (see Fig. 7). These results implied that the selectivity of sensor L1 toward Hg²⁺ was remarkable and sensor L1 can be used as a potential chemosensor for Hg²⁺ ions.

The colorimetric and UV–vis limits of sensor **L1** for Hg²⁺ cation was also tested and presented in Fig. 8. The detection limit within visual color changes is allowable to 5.0×10^{-6} M level of Hg²⁺ cation in 1.0×10^{-6} M solution of sensor **L1**. While the detection limit of the UV–vis changes calculated on the basis of $3 s_B/S$ [35] is 1.0×10^{-7} M for Hg²⁺ cation, pointing to the high detection sensitivity.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we designed and synthesized an easy-to-make Hg^{2+} sensor **L1** which bearing thiosemicarbazide moiety as recognition site and nitrophenyl moiety as signal group. Sensor **L1** showed colorimetric single selectivity for Hg^{2+} in DMSO and DMSO/H₂O binary solutions. Comparison with sensor **L2** indicates that the nitrophenyl moiety acted as a signal group and played a crucial role in the process of colorimetric recognition. The researches of recognition mechanism indicated that the sensor **L1** recognize Hg^{2+} by form a stable 1:1 **L1**-Hg²⁺ complex. The coexisting of other cations could not interfere the Hg^{2+} recognition process, moreover, the detection limit of the sensor **L1** could potentially be useful as a probe for monitoring Hg^{2+} levels in physiological and environmental systems.

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