

REVIEW

Discovery of biomimetic transamination as a general synthetic method for preparation of fluorine-containing amines and amino acids

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Abstract: In this perspective review article, we describe the discovery of azomethine-azomethine isomerization of fluorinated *N*-benzyl-imines and its further development into one of the most convenient, scalable, and practical synthetic methods for preparation of biologically relevant fluorinated amines and amino acids. Currently referred to as 1,3-Proton Shift Reaction, this method is widely used by organic chemists for synthesis of variety fluorinated amino compounds playing important role in the design of modern pharmaceuticals and agrochemicals.

Keywords: biomimetic reductive amination; fluorinated compounds; amines; α - and β -amino acids; drug design.

Introduction

In 1980s the spectacular future role of fluorine in drug discovery has been far from obvious. Handful of fluorinated pharmaceuticals on the market, such as fludrocortisone **1** [1] and 5-fluorouracil **2** [2] (Figure 1), were considered as a mere curiosity since the extremely poisonous properties of a few naturally occurring fluoroorganic compounds [3] were very well known [4].

On the other hand, amino acids (AAs) are among the most ubiquitous naturally occurring compounds and serve numerous biological functions in living organisms [5]. Traditionally, naturally occurring and tailor-made (synthetic) AAs are being quite frequently used in the modern drug design [6, 7]. Clairvoyant or not, the decision

made by Academician V.P. Kukhar in the late 1980s to initiate a new line of research targeting synthesis and bio-evaluation of fluorine-containing AAs turn out to be one of the most successful and prolific legacies of the Ukrainian science of chemistry [8]. Nowadays, the introduction of fluorine-containing substituents into the structure of a drug candidate is a rapidly growing trend in the design of modern drugs [9, 10]. Rational, selective fluorination allows for fine-tuning of the targeted bioactivity and pharmacokinetics. Over the last 20 years, fluorine scanning and editing became rather standard steps in the design of new drugs [9, 10]. Tailor-made fluorine-containing AAs are a particularly exciting class of molecules widely used in drug design [11]. Some of the most successful compounds

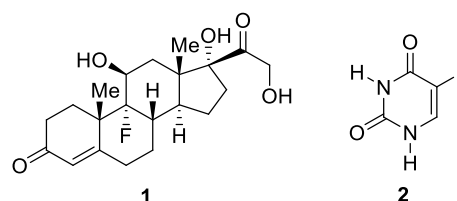


Figure 1. Structures of fludrocortisone **1** and 5-fluorouracil **2**.

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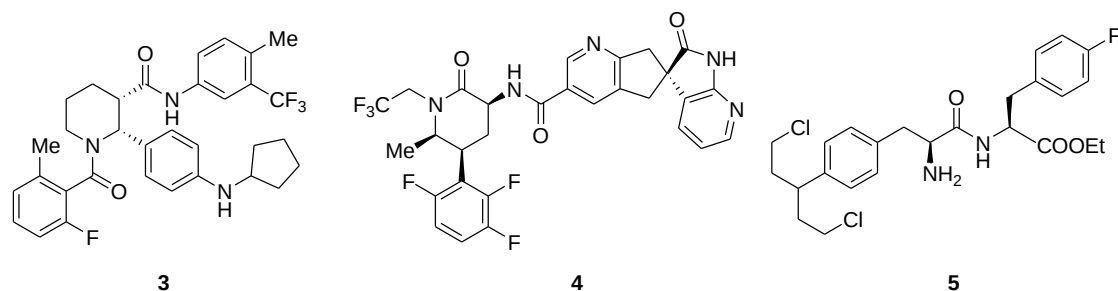


Figure 2. Recently approved drugs Avacopan (Tavneos™) **3**, Atogepant (Qulipta™) **4** and Melflufen (Pepaxto™) **5**.

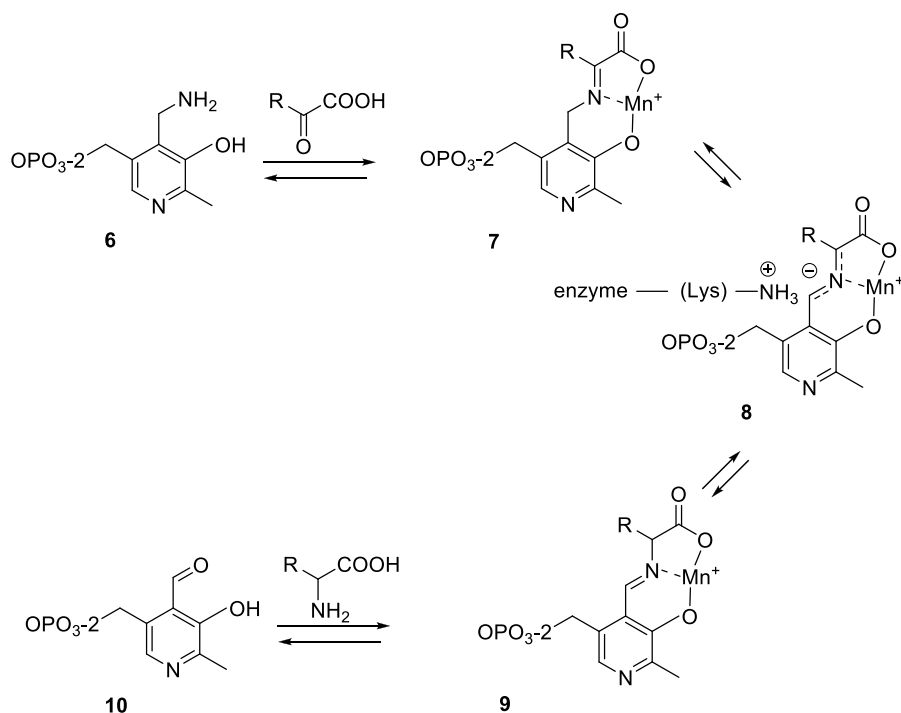
recently introduced to the market are shown in Figure 2.

Avacopan (Tavneos™) **3** is an orally bioavailable highly selective antagonist of human C5aR1 [12] was introduced by ChemoCentryx. In 2021, Avacopan was approved by the US FDA for the treatment of ANCA-associated vasculitis, a rare form of autoimmune disease [13]. It contains fragments of cyclic β -AA and two types of fluorination, aromatic F- and CF_3 -groups. Atogepant (Qulipta™) **4** was developed by AbbVie as an orally active and selective antagonist of the calcitonin gene-related peptide (CGRP) receptors [14]. This drug was approved, in 2021, by US FDA for the preventive treatment of episodic migraines in adults [15]. Atogepant contains substituted ornithine, in its lactam form, along with aromatic (F) and aliphatic ($\text{CF}_3\text{-CH}_2$) fluorination motifs. Melflufen (Pepaxto™) **5** is a dipeptide composed of two tailor-made AA melphalan [16] and *p*-fluorophenylalanine. It was developed by Oncopeptides for the treatment of multiple myeloma and amyloid light-chain amyloidosis. In 2021 the US FDA approved Melflufen **5** in combination

with dexamethasone for the treatment of pre-treated adult patients with relapsed or refractory multiple myeloma [17].

Biological transamination [18], is a primarily important process in living organisms providing metabolic interconversion of β -keto and α -amino acids (Scheme 1). Mechanistically, biological transamination consists of a base-catalyzed 1,3-proton transfer across the azaallylic anion intermediate **8** giving rise to Schiff bases of α -keto acids **7** or α -amino acids **9** as precursors of α -amino acids and pyridoxamine **10**, and correspondingly, α -keto carboxylic acids and pyridoxal **6** [19]. In a biological system, the 1,3-proton transfer is catalyzed by the enzymatic lysine omega-amino group which performs enantio-selective proton transfer furnishing either **7** or **9** via the delocalized 2-azaallyl anion **8** [20].

Numerous research groups, in particular, Breslow's [21], Snell's [19e], Martell's [19a], Cram's [22], and Casella's [23] studied the mechanism and stereochemistry of the

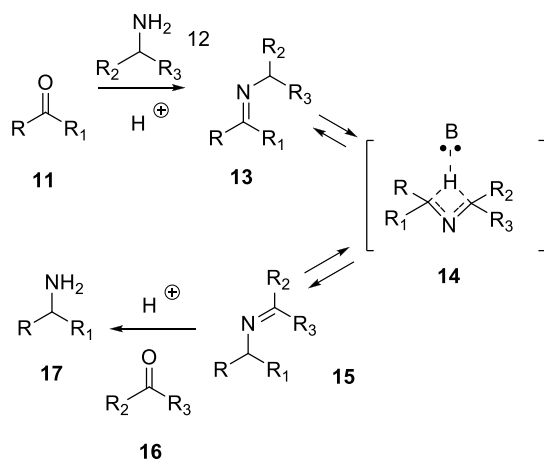


Scheme 1. Biochemical interconversion of α -amino and α -keto acids.

biological transamination using native as well as model pyridoxal-based systems. They pointed out the importance of the corresponding metal complex formation in controlling the rate and stereochemistry of the transamination process. Furthermore, it was demonstrated that the 1,3-proton shift, in general, requires a strong base for the isomerization to occur at a synthetically useful rate [24]. Moreover, the equilibrium constants measured for the reaction were found to be satisfactorily correlated by the Hammett equation ($r = 0.94$) suggesting the formation of delocalized azaallylic anion intermediate of type **8**, stabilized by electron-withdrawing and correspondingly, destabilized by electron-releasing substituents [25].

Biomimetic transamination. Non-fluorinated substrates.

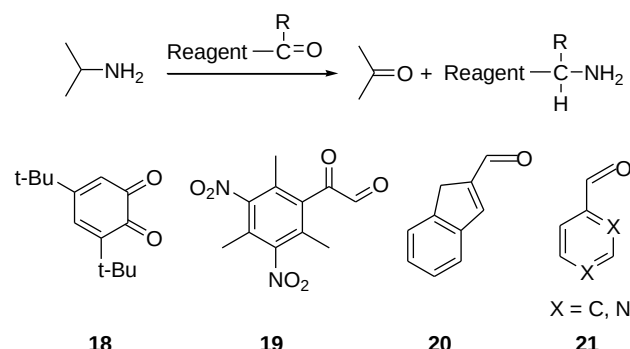
From a synthetic point of view, the biological transamination is an intramolecular reduction-oxidation process via base-catalyzed 1,3-proton shift in the azaallylic system of the corresponding imine (Scheme 2). Obviously, if there is a way to control the equilibrium between imines **13** and **15**, then one can realize as biomimetic approach for oxidation of amines **17** to carbonyl compounds **11**, or conversely, reductive amination of carbonyl compounds **11** to amines **17**. To consider this biomimetic approach synthetically useful, the equilibrium between **13** and **15** should show a clear preference for one of the compounds. The obvious methodological advantage of this biomimetic approach over traditional chemical reduction/oxidation methods is that it does not require the use of external oxidative or reducing reagents allowing for the development of an environmentally benign, metal-free reduction or oxidation processes [26].



Scheme 2. Biomimetic transamination of carbonyl compound **11** to amine **17** and vice versa.

First attempts to mimic the biological transamination were reported by Professor's Corey group who designed highly electrophilic carbonyl compounds **18** and **19** (Scheme 3) and showed their application biomimetic oxidative deamination of primary amines to the corresponding ketones in high yields [26]. Calo *et al.* reported that aldehyde **20** can be efficiently used for

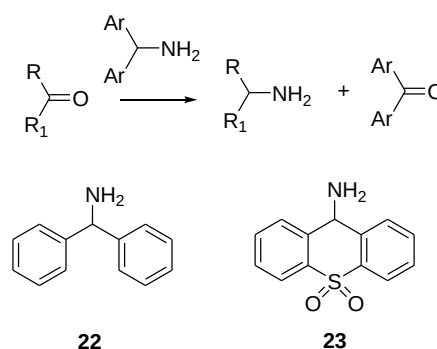
oxidative deamination of some amines [27]. Various reagents of type **21**, mimicking natural pyridoxal **6**, were designed by Ohta's [28], Babler's [29] and Rapoport's [30] groups, were shown to be of more general synthetic application as they can be used for preparation of both aldehydes and ketones.



Scheme 3. Synthetically useful reagents for biomimetic transamination.

Examples of biomimetic reductive amination of carbonyl compounds were reported by Cainelli [31], Kuzuhara [32], Breslow [33], Zwanenburg [34], Berg [35], and others [36–39].

In most of cases, benzhydryl aldimines **22**, **23** (Scheme 4), possessing quite an acidic proton as well additional stabilization of the product imine via the resonance, were used as a source of hydrogen and nitrogen atoms. Nevertheless, the application of strong bases, like KOtBu was required to promote the biomimetic 1,3-proton shift transfer. Application of this approach for transamination of ketones was less successful, as compared to aldehydes, except for electrophilic derivatives of α,β -dicarbonyl compounds, and β -lactams.

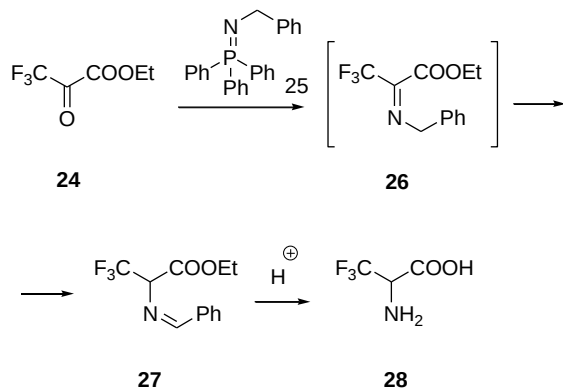


Scheme 4. Application of amines **22** and **23** for biomimetic reductive amination of some carbonyl compounds.

Biomimetic transamination. Fluorinated substrates.

The discovery of biomimetic reductive amination of fluorinated carbonyl compounds dates to 1986 when Kuhar group was trying to perform the Staudinger reaction between keto-ester **24** and phosphazene **25** (Scheme 5) [40]. It was surprising to discover the formation of Schiff base **27** as a sole reaction product. By contrast, the reactions of the

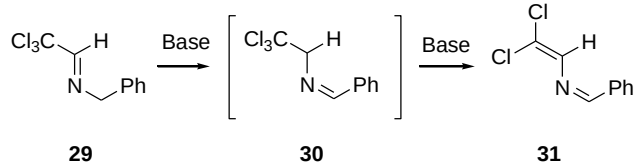
corresponding *N*-alkyl or *N*-aryl phosphazenes in the place of *N*-benzyl **25** gave the expected imine products of type **26** in high isolated yield [40c]. One can assume that the target product **26** underwent in situ irreversible isomerization to imine **27**, catalyzed by the basic reagent **25**. Product **27** was easily hydrolyzed to yield trifluoroalanine **28** in high yield [41].



Scheme 5. Staudinger reaction followed by irreversible isomerization of **26** to **27**.

Investigation of possible mechanistic details of the base-catalyzed azomethine-azomethine isomerization of trifluoromethyl containing *N*-benzyl imines pointed to a nonionic character of the corresponding intermediates, similar to **14** (Scheme 2) [42]. The role of a base, even as weak as triethylamine, was suggested to increase the polarization of one of the benzylic protons thus facilitating a concerted 1,3-proton shift transfer within a four-membered ring. [43].

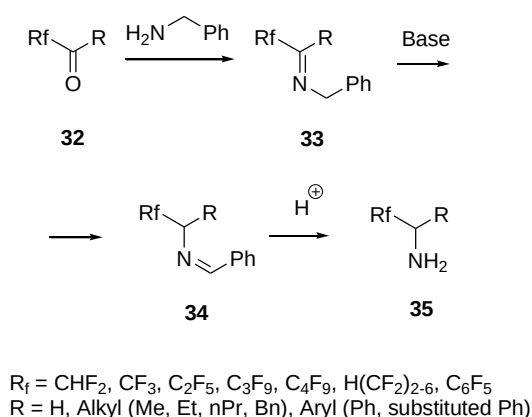
Quite interesting, attempts to use this procedure for chloro- or bromo-containing substrates were not successful. In these cases, the expected dehydrohalogenation was the major outcome of the reactions. For example, the 1,3-proton shift in trichloromethyl imine **29** (Scheme 6) was followed by the dehydrochlorination to yield compound **31** as a sole isolated product [43]. Besides the difference in stability of C-F and C-Cl bonds, this profound difference in the outcome of the reactions of trifluoro- vs. trichloromethyl-containing compounds can be additionally explained by very specific steric [44] and electrostatic [45] effects of trifluoromethyl group repulsing nucleophilic species and thus protecting the imine products from the dehydrochlorination.



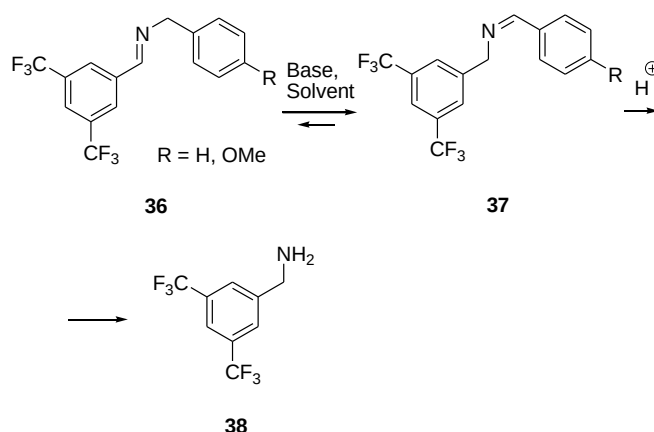
Scheme 6. Attempts to use chlorinated substrates in the biomimetic reductive amination.

The unexpected outcome of the Staudinger reaction (Scheme 5) was followed up by a systematic study of isomerization of *N*-benzyl imines **33** (Scheme 7) derived from various fluorinated aldehydes and ketones **32** [46]. Starting imines **33** can be quantitatively obtained by a direct condensation of benzylamine and the corresponding

carbonyl compound using Dean-Stark conditions. It was found that such a relatively weak base as triethylamine is sufficiently active as a catalyst for the isomerization of **33** to Schiff bases **34**. The observed reaction rates were substantially faster for the aldehydes series as compared with that of ketones, which can be rationalized by the lower electrophilicity of the latter due to the electron-donating effect of an alkyl group. In particular, in the case of aldehydes, the isomerization of **33** to **34** takes place at ambient temperature, while in the reaction of keto-derivatives required slightly elevated temperatures (40–50 °C) for optimal reaction rates. As presented in Scheme 7, carbonyl compounds containing difluoromethyl, trifluoromethyl, perfluoroalkyl, ω -hydro-perfluoroalkyl, and pentafluorophenyl groups were shown to be excellent substrates for biomimetic transamination to the corresponding amines. The triethylamine-catalyzed transformation of **33** to **34** is virtually irreversible providing the latter in high chemical yields (>85%). The resultant product **34** can be easily hydrolyzed (1N HCl) to obtain target amines **35**.

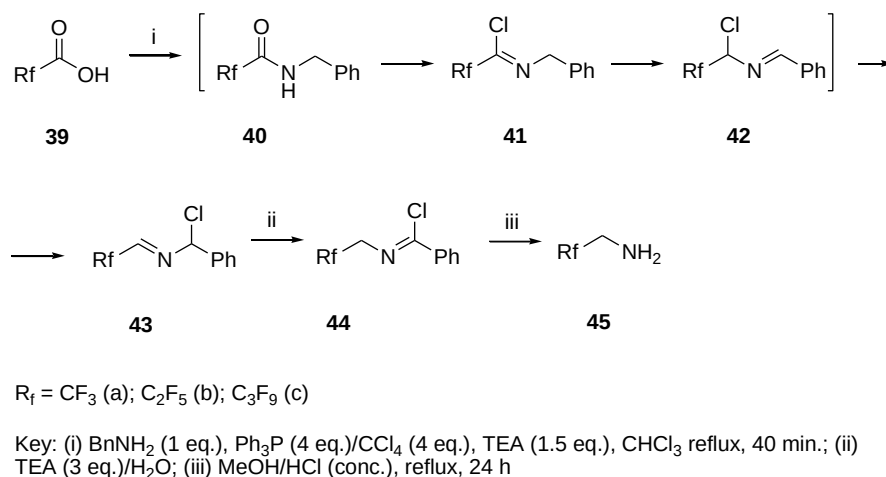


Scheme 7. Biomimetic reductive amination of fluorinated aldehydes and ketones.



Scheme 8. Biomimetic transamination approach for preparation 3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl)benzylamine (**38**).

It is interesting to note that in some cases the isomerization of **33** to **34** can take place even without a base, suggesting much greater thermodynamic stability of the latter. Thus, *N*-benzyl imine derived from trifluoroacetophenone **33** ($R_f = CF_3, R = Ph$) was quantitatively isomerized to Schiff base **34** simply by heating at 200 °C for



Scheme 9. Application of biomimetic transamination for preparation of amines from the corresponding carboxylic acids.

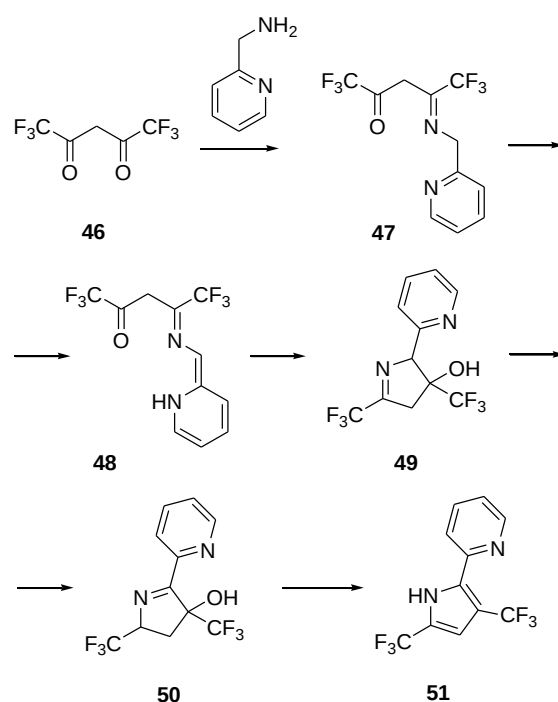
24 hrs. The target free amine **35** was isolated with excellent (>95%) overall yield [47]. This biomimetic transamination procedure can be easily scaled-up and represents the most advanced preparation of amine **35** ($\text{R}_f = \text{CF}_3$, $\text{R} = \text{Ph}$), the fluorinated analog of highly biologically important α -(phenyl)ethylamine.

This biomimetic transamination approach can be extended to the derivatives in which trifluoromethyl group is not directly attached to the azaallylic system. For example, 3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl)benzylamine **38** (Scheme 8), is a key pharmacophore found in numerous biologically active compounds and drug candidates [48]. Therefore, this compound was an exciting target for the biomimetic transamination approach starting from commercially available 3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl) benzaldehyde [49]. Initial attempts to use benzylamine for the transamination of the 3,5-bis(trifluoromethyl) benzaldehyde resulted in an equilibrium shifted towards product **37** (85/15), albeit to a degree of low synthetic application. Further optimization of the reaction conditions (CH_3CN as a solvent and DBU as a base) and application of *p*-(methoxy)benzylamine allowed for a noticeable shift in the equilibrium towards the desired product **37** (95%), which was hydrolyzed to afford the target amine **38** in 75% overall yield.

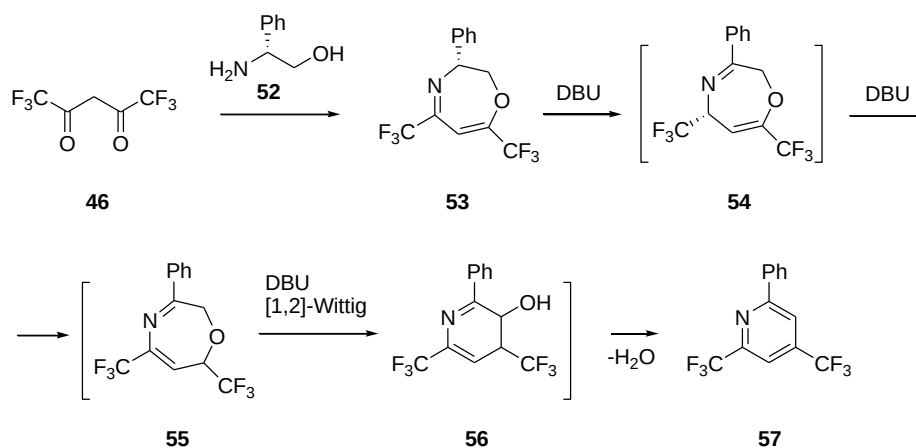
Of particular importance is the unique application of biomimetic transamination for preparation of amines from the corresponding carboxylic acids. This method involves in situ formation of amides **40**, their transformation to imidoyl chlorides **41**, followed by the first 1,3 proton transfer affording imines **42**. The next reaction step is a chlorotropic shift to yield imines **43**, which undergoes the second 1,3-proton transfer yielding **44**. Imidoyl chlorides **44** can be isolated and via two hydrolytic steps converted to the target amines **45**. Taking into account that the whole transformation involves a sequence of seven reactions, the excellent isolated yields (>90%) of amines **45** were quite remarkable (Scheme 9) [50].

Due to very high reactivity, chemistry of fluorinated dicarbonyl compounds is significantly complicated by the issues of regioselectivity, enolate formation, and structural liability (decomposition) towards nucleophilic reagents. For

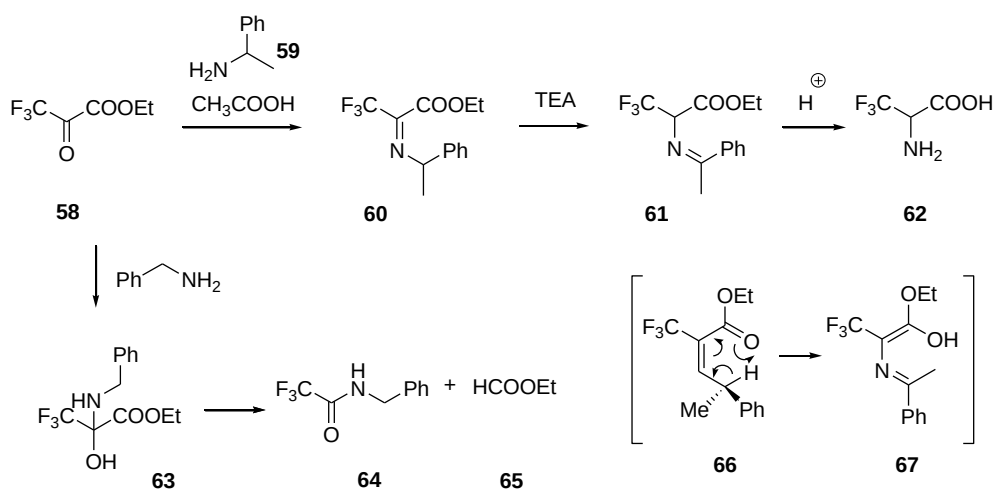
example, reactions of 1,1,1,5,5,5-hexafluoro-2,4-pentanedione **46** (Scheme 10) with benzylamine gives rise to a mixture of various inseparable products and therefore are of no synthetic value. In sharp contrast to benzylamine, the reaction of 2-picolylamine with dione **46** was found to be a convenient approach of preparation of trifluoromethyl containing myosmines **50**. The whole process includes a series of successive reactions such as formation of the direct condensation product, imine **47**, base-catalyzed 1,3 proton transfer to form highly nucleophilic intermediate **48**, its cyclization to form five-membered 3,4-dihydro-2H-pyrrol-3-ols **49**, followed by the second base-catalyzed 1,3 proton transfer to furnish the target myosmines **50**. Compounds **50** can be isolated or directly dehydrated giving rise to 2-(2-pyridyl)-3,5-bis-(trifluoromethyl)-1H-pyrrole **51** as a sole reaction product [39]. It should be noted that equilibrium



Scheme 10. Biomimetic reductive amination approach of preparation of trifluoromethyl containing myosmines **50**.



Scheme 11. Biomimetic method for preparation of 2,4-bis(tri-fluoromethyl)-6-phenylpyridine.



Scheme 12. Biomimetic synthesis of trifluoro-alanine.

between **47** and **48** significantly favors **47**, however, the irreversible cyclization of **48** to form products **48** followed by biomimetic 1,3 proton shift, drives the reaction to completion with the formation of myosmines **50** [51].

Another synthetically useful reaction of dione **46**, including the biomimetic isomerization step as a key transformation, is presented in Scheme 11. Direct condensation of dione **46** with glycine **52** gave cyclic product bis(tri-fluoromethyl)-2,3-dihydro-1,4-oxazepine **53**. Treatment of oxazepine **53** with a DBU initiated the biomimetic 1,3 proton shift affording 1,4-oxazepine **54**. Intermediate **54** cannot be isolated, undergoing in situ yet another DBU-catalyzed 1,3 proton transfer to yield one more isomeric 1,4-oxazepine **55**. Finally, DBU-catalyzed [1, 2] Wittig rearrangement of **55** gave rise to 3,4-dihydropyridin-3-ol **56**. Dehydration of compound **56** resulted in the formation of 2,4-bis(tri-fluoromethyl)-6-phenylpyridine **57** as a final reaction product [52]. One may agree, these multi-step transformations clearly underscore very complex chemistry of fluorinated dicarbonyl compounds. Nevertheless, successful synthesis of interesting fluorine-containing heterocyclic compounds under mild and metal-free conditions bodes well for future application of

biomimetic approach in the chemistry of heterocyclic biologically active compounds.

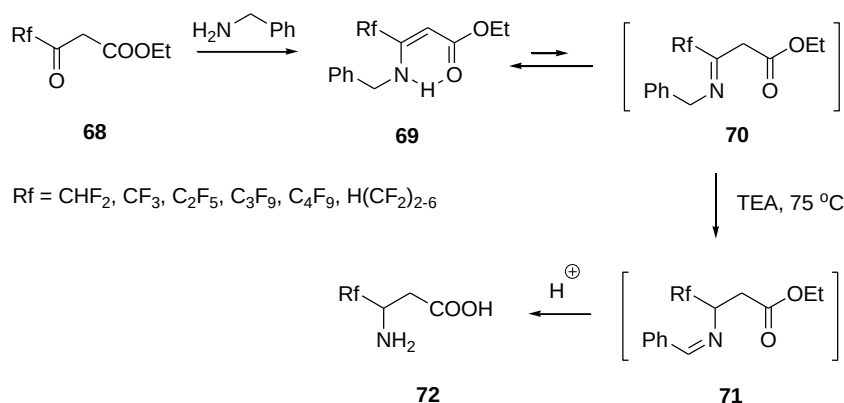
Fluorinated α -keto acids are highly electrophilic compounds. For example, the reaction of keto ester **58** (Scheme 12) with benzylamine gives stable crystalline gem-amino alcohol **63** which can be isolated and fully characterized. However, attempts to dehydrate compound **63** to the corresponding imine under various conditions usually result in the haloformic decomposition giving rise to amide **64** and ester **65**. To overcome the problem of exceptionally high electrophilicity of fluorinated α -keto acids, a special procedure was developed. As shown in Scheme 12, keto ester **58** was reacted with a salts α -(phenyl)ethylamine **59** to form the corresponding gem-amino alcohol which gradually underwent acid-catalyzed dehydration to furnish the target imine **60** in excellent chemical yield (>95%) [53].

Biomimetic isomerization of Schiff base **60** to imine **61** can be quantitatively conducted at ambient temperature in the presence of triethylamine. Acidic hydrolysis of **61** afforded the target trifluoroalanine **62** [54]. It should be noted that application of enantiomerically pure α -(phenyl)ethylamine allowed preparation of also

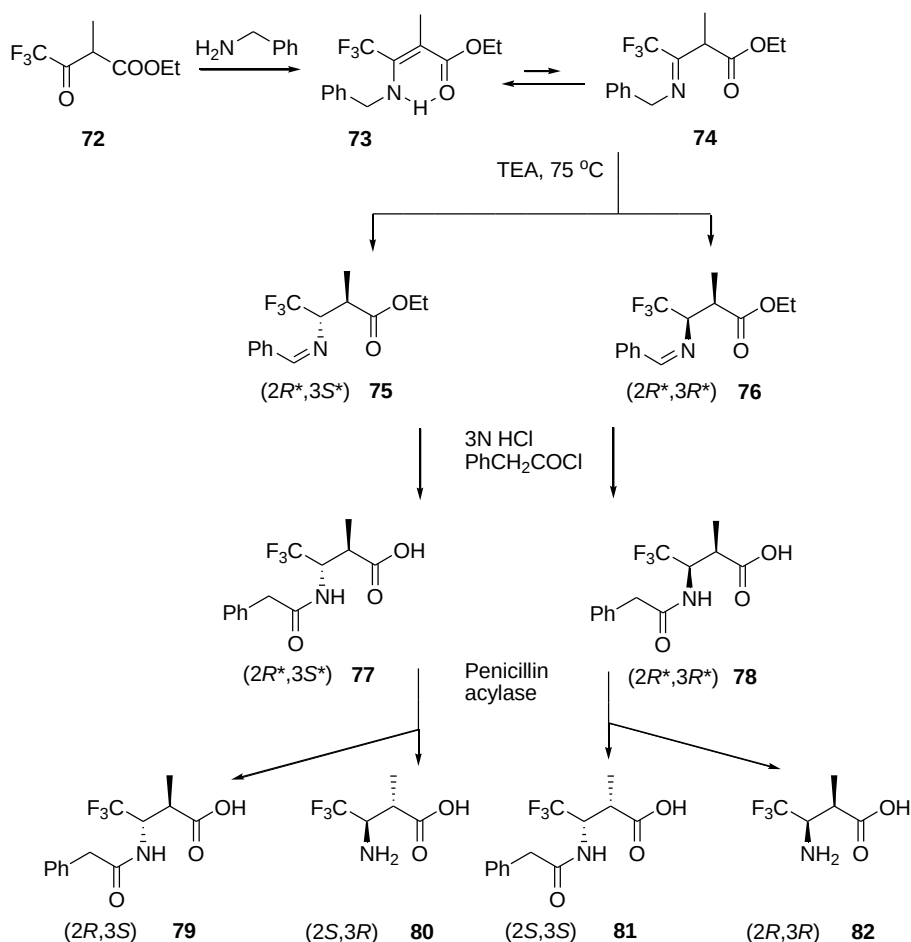
enantiomerically pure imine **60**, triethylamine-catalyzed isomerization of which resulted in completely racemic amino acid **62**. To explain this stereochemical outcome one may propose that the proton transfer take place via six-membered transition state **66** leading to achiral intermediate enolate **67**.

Due to the high biological value of fluorinated β -amino acids [55] the biomimetic approach for reductive amination of β -ketoacids is of great synthetic interest. As presented in

Scheme 13, derived from keto esters **68** and benzylamine, imines **70** were cleanly isomerized to Schiff bases **71** on heating at 75 °C in the presence of triethylamine. It should be mentioned that the equilibrium between enamine **69** and imine **70** is nearly completely shifted towards the former. Nevertheless, the very fast and irreversible biomimetic isomerization of **70** affords Schiff bases **71** as the final reaction products [56]. Acidic hydrolysis of imines **71** allows preparation of the target fluorinated β -amino acids **72** in high overall yield.



Scheme 13. Biomimetic approach to fluorinated β -amino acids.

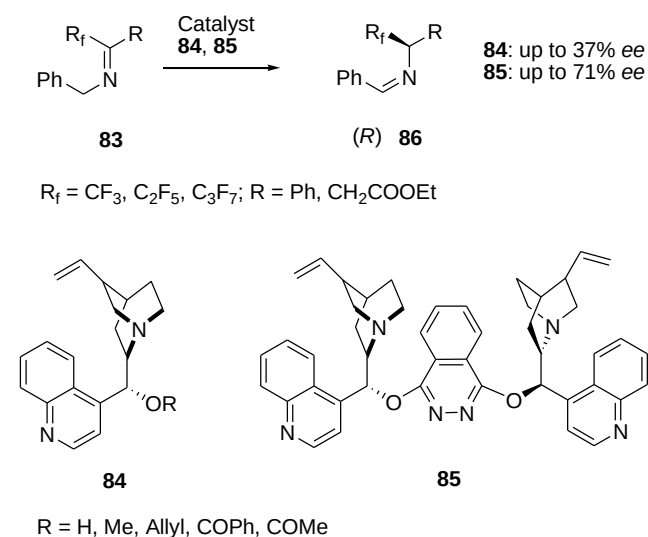


Scheme 14. Chemo-enzymatic approach for synthesis of all four possible stereoisomers of α -alkyl- β -fluoroalkyl- β -amino acids.

This biomimetic approach for the reductive amination of β -keto esters **68** is quite general and provides for the most reliable and scalable preparation of biologically important β -fluoroalkyl- β -amino acids **72**. It should be noted that the amino acids **72** are readily available in enantiomerically pure form via specially developed enzymatic resolution of the corresponding *N*-phenylacetyl derivatives using penicillin acylase [57].

Combination of the biomimetic transamination and the penicillin acylase catalyzed resolution was realized in a chemo-enzymatic approach for synthesis of all four possible stereoisomers of α -alkyl- β -fluoroalkyl- β -amino acids (Scheme 14) [58]. Racemic starting keto ester **72** was transformed into a mixture of enamine **73** and ketimine **74**. Biomimetic isomerization of **74** afforded diastereomers **75** and **76**. Detailed investigation of this isomerization allowed to find that the use of triethylamine as a base favored the (2*R**,3*S**) diastereomer **75** (40% *de*), while the application of DBU gave (2*R**,3*R**) diastereomer **76** as the major product (39% *de*).

Diastereomerically pure **75** and **76**, obtained by column chromatography, were transformed to *N*-phenylacetyl derivatives **77** and **78** and subjected to kinetic resolution using penicillin acylase. The enzyme-catalyzed hydrolysis of the enantiomers possessing (3*R*) stereogenic carbon was extremely stereoselective with the rate of higher than 1 to 1000, thus allowing for a complete resolution with excellent chemical yields of both enantiomers. Free (2*S*,3*R*)-**80** and (2*R*,3*R*)-**82** can be easily separated from the corresponding unhydrolyzed enantiomers (2*R*,3*S*)-**79** and (2*S*,3*S*)-**81**, which can be hydrolyzed under conventional acidic conditions to produce the corresponding amino acids.

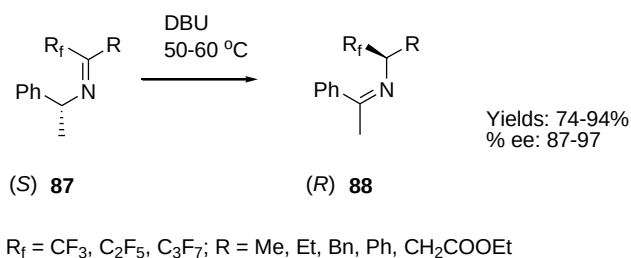


Scheme 15. Asymmetric approaches for biomimetic reductive amination.

Since the interest in fluorinated amines and amino acids is associated with their biological applications in the design of modern pharmaceuticals [59], the development of asymmetric approaches for the biomimetic transamination is particular interest. As shown in Scheme 15, series of cinchonidine derived catalysts **84**, and **85** were used to

perform catalytic asymmetric reductive amination of ketimines **83**. Due to relatively low basicity of chiral catalysts **84** the isomerization reactions required high load (50 mol%) of the catalyst and elevated temperatures [60]. The highest enantioselectivity obtained was only in the range of 37% *ee*. A significant advance in this area has been reported recently by J.C. Plaquevent et al. [61]. These authors conducted a systematic study of all factors influencing the enantioselective isomerization step and found that C_2 symmetric catalyst **85** allows the reaction to proceed with up to 71% *ee*.

Another approach to asymmetric biomimetic reductive amination of fluorinated ketones and keto acids can be straightforward application of chiral α -(phenyl)ethylamine in the place of benzylamine. It was found that triethylamine is ineffective as a catalyst for the isomerization of ketimines **87**. The reason for such a drastic difference in reactivity of benzylamine and α -(phenyl)ethylamine is likely the significantly reduced C-H acidity of the latter [62]. On the other hand, application of a stronger base raised a due concern of the products **88** racemization. It should be noted that this type of asymmetric transformation involves the enantioselective proton transfer from a less to a more C-H acidic product. Thermodynamically, such enantioselective process is forbidden. However, it can be successfully conducted under kinetically controlled conditions, provided that the isomerization step is substantially faster as compared to the racemization of the target product. Moreover, it was also expected that trifluoromethyl group due to its steric bulk [44] and electrostatic features [45] might have some protective role [63] slowing down the undesired racemization process. Detailed investigation of the isomerization of imine **87** to **88** revealed rather unexpected results (Scheme 16). Thus, while racemization was indeed a serious issue at high temperatures, virtually no racemization was observed at ambient-to-60 °C temperature. The discovered DBU-catalyzed reaction conditions were found to be of general synthetic use for asymmetric biomimetic reductive amination of various ketones and β -keto acids with good chemical yields and high diastereoselectivity [64, 65].



Scheme 16. Stoichiometric asymmetric reductive amination.

It is interesting to note that the work on asymmetric reductive amination of fluorinated ketones and keto acids led to the discovery of Self-Disproportionation of Enantiomers (SDE) [66] under the conditions of achiral chromatography [67] and sublimation [68]. In particular, fluorinated amines [69], α - [70], β -amino acids [71], and alcohols [72] usually show very high magnitude of the SDE allowing to use this phenomenon as enantiopurification

method. Nowadays, it is commonly accepted that the SDE is the general phenomenon resulting in enantio-enriched and enantio-depleted fractions anytime a chiral enantiomerically enriched (not racemic or enantiomerically pure) is subjected to physicochemical phase transition. General recognition of the SDE prompted some academic journals to require the SDE-tests as a part of submitted experimental data [73].

Conclusions

In this review, we highlighted major synthetic and methodological ideas which were developed in the area of biomimetic reductive amination of fluorine-containing carbonyl. Some of the methods have rather limited application, while others offer quite practical synthetically efficient solutions. Given the increasing importance of fluorinated amino compounds in health-related research and pharmaceutical industry, the biomimetic transamination may be a method of choice providing the most convenient, generalized, and greener (metal-free) approach to this class of derivatives.

Notes

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions. The manuscript was written through contributions of all authors. All authors have approved to the final version of the manuscript.

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Біоміметичне трансамінування як загальний підхід до синтезу фторовмісних амінів та амінокислот

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Резюме: Огляд присвячений відкриттю реакції азометин-азометинової ізомеризації фторованих *N*-бензилімінів та її подальшому розвитку в один із найбільш зручних, масштабованих і доступних синтетичних методів отримання біологічно значущих фторованих амінів і амінокислот. Цей метод, який зараз називають реакцією 1,3-протонного зсуву, широко використовується хіміками-органіками для синтезу різноманітних фторованих аміносполук, які відіграють важливу роль у розробці сучасних фармацевтичних препаратів і агрохімікатів.

Ключові слова: біоміметичне відновне амінування; фторовані сполуки; аміни; α - і β -амінокислоти; раціональне конструювання ліків.