An expedient synthesis of fused heteroacenes bearing a pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core†

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Received 14th September 2012, Accepted 3rd November 2012
DOI: 10.1039/c2cc36689d

Two linear fused heteroacenes bearing a pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core have been synthesized via a novel reductive ring closure methodology in three steps and in good overall yield. Preliminary OFET results showed that dinaphtho[2,3-b:2′,3′-f]pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole (DNPP) is a potential candidate for organic electronics.

Linear extended π-conjugated acenes are of great interest for organic electronics applications, such as organic field-effect transistors (OFETs), organic light-emitting diodes (OLEDs) and organic photovoltaic cells. One of the most well-known compounds is pentacene (Scheme 1, compound 1), which consists of five-fused benzene rings. It showed a charge carrier mobility benchmark as high as 5.5 cm2 V−1 s−1. It was expected that acenes with longer π-conjugated systems such as hexacene and heptacene would exhibit even better charge carrier mobility. However, those fused acenes, including pentacene, are not air-stable due to their high-lying HOMO energy levels. Furthermore, acenes with the number of fused rings greater than five are also prone to photo-degradation and Diels–Alder reactions. Those fused acenes needed to be protected with bulky protecting groups for better stability.

One of the solutions to this problem is to use fused heteroacenes instead of pentacene and its higher homologues. Linear fused heteroacenes solely based on thiophene rings (up to eight rings) were synthesized. Their potential as OFET materials was widely investigated and summarized in recent reviews. In general, they showed better stability, but mobility was still lower than pentacene. Most recently, heteroacenes bearing a thieno[3,2-b]thiophene core and its seleno analogue (Scheme 1, compounds 6 and 7) have received much attention. Those materials exhibited high air-stability and high field-effect mobility, and single crystal transistors of diimethyl[2,3-b,2′,3′-f] thieno[3,2-b]thiophene even demonstrated a saturation region hole mobility as high as 12.3 cm2 V−1 s−1.

Surprisingly, to the best of our knowledge, there is no report on the synthesis of large heteroacenes (more than four fused rings) bearing a pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core, although their OFET properties were claimed in a few patents. Pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole was predicted to be the most efficient electron donor among 10π-electron systems, however, it is unstable and very difficult to synthesize.10 5,10-Dihydroindolo[3,2-b]indole (also known as dibenzopyrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole, DBPP) is the most well-known extended heteroacene bearing a pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core, which was used as a building block for high-spin organic polymers11 and OLED polymers. Several routes towards DBPP were summarized by Kaszynski and Dougherty and more recently by Samsoniya and Trapaidze, most of them involving the formation of C–N bonds as the key step, and the overall yields were relatively low.13 The limitation of current synthetic tools hampered the synthesis of more extended fused heteroacenes containing the pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core.

We were interested in the synthesis of linear heteroacenes containing the pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core since: (1) pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole is a better electron donor than thieno[3,2-b]thiophene, hence might be a better p-type organic semiconductor; (2) a more compact assembly of the molecules might be realized because of the smaller atomic radius of N compared with S; (3) NH–π interaction might facilitate bidirectional electronic coupling between the molecules for better charge mobility,14 and (4) the open valence on the N atom might be utilized to modify the solubility of the molecule for solution-processable OFETs. We here wish to report a novel and expedient way to construct heteroacenes with pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core and the preliminary results of their optical and OFET properties.

Our strategy was initially inspired by a report on the reduction of diazocines, which resulted in substituted tetrahydroindolo[3,2-b]-indole.15 We envisioned that if dibenzo[8]1,5[diaza]cine 8 could be...
obtained, it might be in turn converted into tetrahydroindolo[3,2-b]indole 9, which upon subsequent oxidation would give the desired compound 10 (Scheme 2, route 1). However, the synthesis of compound 8 turned out to be rather difficult: the direct condensation of 2-aminobenzaldehyde was not applicable since it would result in a cyclic trimer or tetramer instead of diazocine, and the newly developed method to synthesize dibenzodiazocine was also not applicable because the corresponding precursor could not be prepared. We then turned our attention to a report on the synthesis of diazocine 8 from 6,12-dichlorodibenzo[f][1,5]diazocine 11. We realized that reduction of compound 11 might directly afford DBPP 10, given that the chlorine atom could act as a good leaving group under reductive conditions (Scheme 2, route 2).

The synthesis of compound 11 is straightforward, as shown in Scheme 3. By treating the commercially available methyl 2-aminobenzoate 12 with sodium hydride under reflux conditions in THF, dibenzo[h][1,5]diazocine-6,12(5H,11H)-dione 13 was obtained in satisfactory yield. Compound 13 was then treated with PCl₅ to afford compound 11 in good yield. Various conditions were tested to reduce compound 11 into compound 10, which are summarized in Table 1. PtO₂/H₂ was reported to reduce diazocine into the corresponding tetrahydroindolo[3,2-b]indole in high yield, but when this condition was directly applied to compound 11, compound 13 was obtained quantitatively (Table 1, entry 1). The same result was obtained when PtO₂/H₂ was removed from the reaction system, indicating that the formation of compound 13 was due to the hydrolysis of 11. Anhydrous conditions were then applied, however, no reduction occurred. SmI₂ was effective in reductive coupling of imines, however, although a small amount of desired compound 10 was obtained, the reaction was sluggish even when large excess of SmI₂ was used to reduce compound 11 (Table 1, entries 4 and 5). But we were delighted to find that the Zn/AcOH/H₂O/DCM condition was successful in reducing 11 into 10 in 40% yield. When the reaction conditions were further modified using stronger acid (trifluoroacetic acid, TFA), and less Zn reagent (6.0 equiv.) in anhydrous THF, the yield of 10 was increased to 65%, although a longer reaction time was needed (Table 1, entry 7). Doubling the amount of Zn and TFA shortened the reaction time to 8 h and improved the yield to 70%. Further increase of the amount of reducing agent did not lead to further improvement. Overall, DBPP was synthesized in three steps from methyl 2-aminobenzoate 12 in 33% yield, which is superior to the methodologies reported before.

Moreover, this method could be extended to the synthesis of longer linear heteroacenes containing the pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core, as shown in Scheme 4. Starting from methyl 3-amino-2-naphthoate 14 and following the same synthetic route, dinaphtho-[2,3-b:2',3'-f]pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole (DNPP, 17) was obtained as a yellowish solid in an overall 25% yield. It is the N-analogue of dinaphtho[2,3-b:2',3'-f]-thieno[3,2-b]thiophene (DNTT).

DNPP is a stable compound and could be stored under ambient conditions without noticeable decomposition in the testing period (for months). It is slightly soluble in DMF or DMSO, hence gives us an opportunity to compare its optical and electrochemical properties with DBPP in solution state, which is summarized in Table 2. The UV-vis spectra of both compounds were recorded and used to estimate their HOMO–LUMO gap (E₉, Eₛ) (ESI, Table S1). The band absorption edge is 371 nm for DBPP and 485 nm for DNPP, which corresponds to Eₛ of 3.34 eV and 2.56 eV respectively. The large bathochromic shift (70 nm) reflects the larger HOMO–LUMO gap caused by the longer π-conjugation length of DNPP. Compared with DNPP (Eₛ of 3.0 eV in solution), DNPP also exhibits a smaller HOMO–LUMO gap. Eₛ of both compounds were estimated using cyclic voltammetry (ESI, Table S2). DBPP showed an irreversible oxidation peak with the peak potential at 0.47 V and an onset around 0.24 V vs. NHE.

Scheme 2 Design of DBPP synthesis.

Scheme 3 Synthetic route towards DBPP.

Scheme 4 Synthetic route towards DNPP.

Table 1 Optimization of the reductive ring-closure step toward a pyrrolo[3,2-b]pyrrole core

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>PtO₂/H₂, AcOH–THF–conc. HCl (1 : 1 : 0.03 vol), rt, 12 h,</td>
<td>13 (quant.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>PtO₂/H₂, anhydr. AcOH–THF (1 : 1, vol), rt, 12 h</td>
<td>N.R.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>PtO₂/H₂, anhydr. AcOH, rt, 12 h</td>
<td>N.R.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SmI₂, 2.0 equiv., THF, rt, 12 h</td>
<td>Conversion ~ 20%, &lt;5% of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SmI₂, 10.0 equiv., THF, rt, 12 h</td>
<td>Conversion ~ 30%, ~8% of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Zn (20.0 equiv.), AcOH–H₂O–DCM (5 : 1 : 2.5 vol), rt, 0.5 h</td>
<td>40% of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Zn (6.0 equiv.), TFA (12.0 equiv.), THF, rt, 18 h</td>
<td>65% of 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Zn (12.0 equiv.), TFA (24.0 equiv.), THF, rt, 8 h</td>
<td>70% of 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DBPP Bare — — —

Electrode. The Si/SiO$_2$ surface was either directly used or pretreated SiO$_2$/Si surface. DNPP showed a better FET effect than C$_2$w.

Compounds were prepared via vacuum deposition. The results are summarized in Table 3. DBPP did not show an obvious FET effect on untreated Si, but exhibited a carrier mobility of $1.1 \times 10^{-3}$ cm$^2$ V$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$ and an on/off ratio of $6.6 \times 10^5$ on the OTS-treated SiO$_2$/Si surface. DNPP showed a better FET effect than DBPP on both untreated and OTS-treated SiO$_2$/Si surfaces, with the highest carrier mobility of $1.4 \times 10^{-2}$ cm$^2$ V$^{-1}$ s$^{-1}$ and on/off ratio of $4.1 \times 10^5$. Typical FET output characteristics and transfer characteristics of DNPP are shown in Fig. 1. Thin film XRD analysis indicates that both compounds are crystalline (ESI† Fig. S4). The mediocre OFET performance might be due to the boundaries between crystal grains in the film, as evidenced by AFM study (ESI† Fig. S5).

In summary, starting from commercially available materials, two linear fused heteroacenes bearing a pyrrole[3,2-b]pyrrole core, namely DBPP and DNPP, were synthesized via a novel reductive ring closure methodology in three steps and in good overall yield. OFET properties of both compounds were studied. Preliminary results showed that DNPP was a better OFET material. The synthesis of other pyrrole[3,2-b]pyrrole-containing heterocycles and the optimization of their OFET properties are currently ongoing in our group.

This work was supported by the “100 Talents” program from the Chinese Academy of Sciences and National Science Foundation of China (21174157).

**Notes and references**


