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## COMMUNICATION

## Pd/NHC-Catalyzed Cross-Coupling Reactions of Nitroarenes

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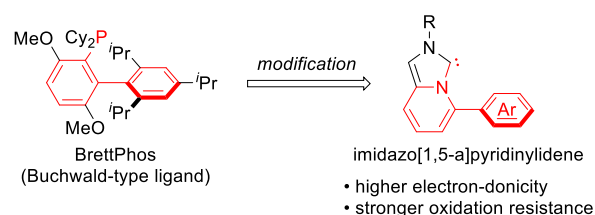
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**N-heterocyclic carbene (NHC) ligands effective for the cross-coupling of nitroarenes were identified. A rational design of the NHC ligand structures enabled significant reduction of catalyst loadings compared with the previous system employing BrettPhos as a phosphine ligand. Experimental and theoretical studies to compare these ligands gave some insights into high activity of the newly developed NHC ligands.**

Denitrative transformations of nitroarenes are advantageous in synthetic chemistry because they serve as an important class of chemical feedstocks readily available from simple nitration of aromatic compounds.<sup>1</sup> In addition, well-established functionalisations of nitroarenes including  $S_NAr/S_EAr/VNS$  and/or C–H functionalisation<sup>2,3</sup> to afford multi-substituted nitroarenes in a site-selective manner make the transformations highly attractive to access a variety of substituted arenes. Conventionally, the replacement of the  $NO_2$  group with various functional groups could be achieved in 3 steps including reduction, diazotization, and Sandmeyer/cross-coupling reactions. Direct transformations of nitro groups have been therefore of high demand to upgrade the synthetic utility of nitroarenes. Some examples of such single-step transformations of  $Ar-NO_2$  bonds have been reported but lacked generality in terms of scope of nitroarenes.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty in the use of nitroarenes for cross-coupling reactions is partly derived from reduction of the  $NO_2$  group by low-valent metal catalysts.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, we previously reported that the combination of palladium as a metal center and BrettPhos<sup>6a</sup> as a supporting ligand enabled the unprecedented oxidative addition of  $Ar-NO_2$  bonds to palladium(0) to enable the Suzuki–Miyaura coupling,<sup>7a</sup> Buchwald–Hartwig amination,<sup>7b</sup> and reductive denitration of nitroarenes.<sup>7c</sup> Although these coupling

reactions opened a novel aspect in chemistry of nitroarenes, there still remained serious issues from a practical point of view such as high loadings of precious Pd (>5 mol%) and expensive Buchwald-type ligands<sup>6</sup> (10–20 mol%). Phosphine ligands could also be deactivated through oxidation by the  $NO_2$  group.

To deviate from phosphine ligands, we turned our attention to the use of NHC ligands.<sup>8</sup> In 2005, the groups of Lassaletta and Glorius independently reported the use of imidazo[1,5-*a*]pyridinylidenes,<sup>9a,b</sup> which appeared to be a hybrid form of the Buchwald-type ligands and NHC ligands (Scheme 1). Subsequently, some derivatives were investigated and published.<sup>9c–9k</sup> Despite being structural mimics of the Buchwald-type ligands, they have rarely been applied to metal-catalysed reactions. We conceived the use of imidazo[1,5-*a*]pyridinylidene bearing an Ar group at the C5 position as a supporting ligand in the cross-coupling reactions of nitroarenes. NHC ligands generally possess higher electron-donicity and tolerance toward oxidation than phosphine ligands. We expected that the NHC ligands could facilitate the rate-determining oxidative addition of  $Ar-NO_2$  bond and elongate a catalyst lifetime by preventing the ligand oxidation.



**Scheme 1.** Design of imidazo[1,5-*a*]pyridinylidene ligands for the cross-coupling of nitroarenes.

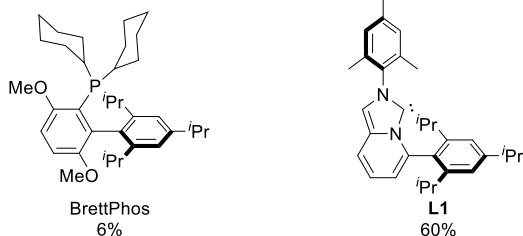
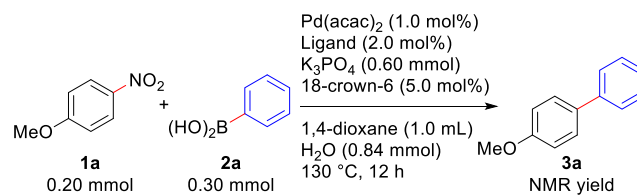
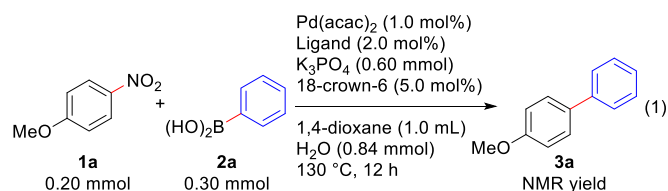
We examined the Suzuki–Miyaura coupling of 4-nitroanisole (**1a**) and phenylboronic acid (**2a**) in the presence of 1.0 mol% Pd(acac)<sub>2</sub> and 2.0 mol% **L1**<sup>9i</sup> (eq 1). In contrast to the use of BrettPhos, which resulted in only 6% of the desired product **3a**, the use of **L1** drastically improved the yield of **3a** to 60%.

Motivated by the preliminary result, we screened various imidazo[1,5-*a*]pyridinylidenes as ligands in the reaction of **1a**

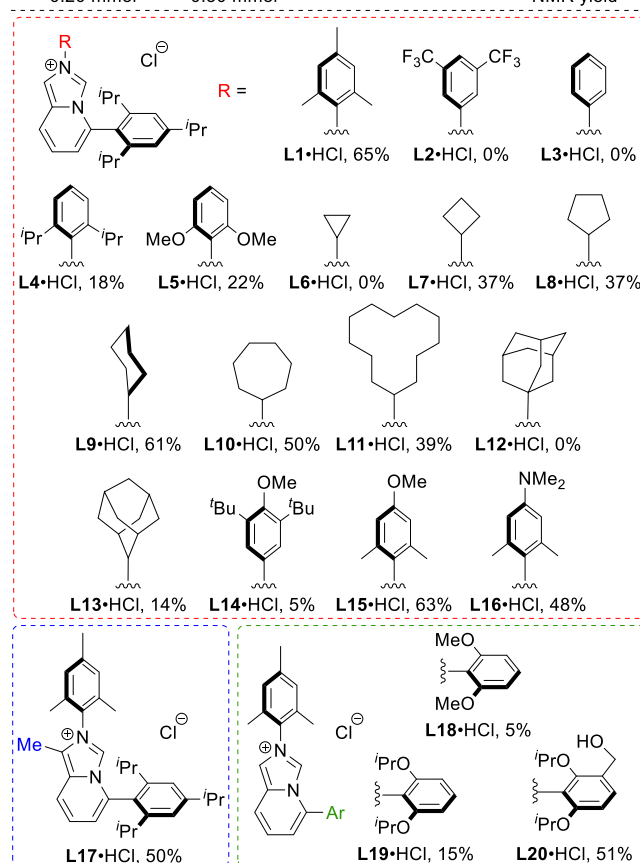
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† Footnotes relating to the title and/or authors should appear here. Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI) available: [details of any supplementary information available should be included here]. See



with **2a** using 1 mol% Pd (Scheme 2). The HCl adduct of **L1** could be used directly without any loss of the yield (entry 1).<sup>10</sup> Regarding the substituent on nitrogen, electron-withdrawing 3,5-bistrifluoromethylphenyl in **L2** and even the phenyl group in **L3** were not suitable at all, while sterically hindered 2,6-diisopropylphenyl in **L4** and 2,6-dimethoxyphenyl in **L5** deteriorated catalytic activity as well, though they were electron-donating. Cycloalkyl substituents seemed good for this system, except for the cyclopropyl group in **L6**, which could react with Pd(0).<sup>11</sup> **L9** showed the best performance among these, producing **3a** in 61% yield. The bulky adamantyl groups in **L12** and **L13**, and 3,5-di-*tert*-butyl-4-methoxyphenyl in **L14** retarded the reaction. **L15** and **L16**, which were expected to be more electron-donating than **L1**, unfortunately failed to improve catalytic activity. Similarly, introducing an electron-donating methyl substituent on the backbone in **L17** did not bring any positive effects. By analogy with the Buchwald-type phosphines, the properties of the C5-aryl group were found to be important. **L18** and **L19** were less active than **L1** in line with the competition of the Buchwald phosphines (SPhos and RuPhos respectively vs. XPhos or BrettPhos) in our previous report.<sup>7a</sup> To our surprise, NHC bearing a hydroxymethyl group **L20** marked higher yield of **3a** than **L19**.<sup>12</sup>



**Scheme 2.** Optimization of ligand structures.

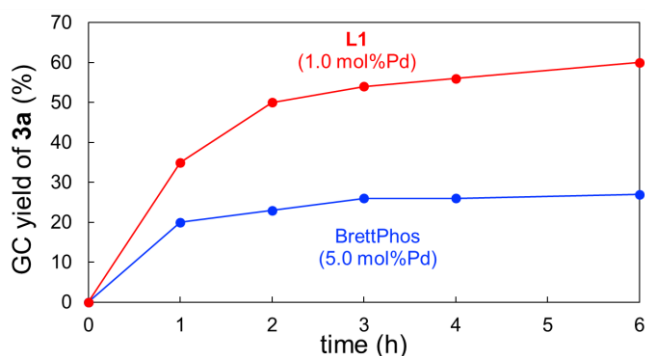
To make this system more efficient, we made an attempt to use (**L1**)Pd complexes as catalyst precursors (Table 1). (**L1**)Pd(acac)Cl was prepared and examined first, but the yield was similar to the case where Pd(acac)<sub>2</sub> and **L1**•HCl were independently used. Another complex (**L1**)Pd(allyl)Cl proved to be effective to afford **3a** in 76%.

**Table 1.** Optimization of catalyst precursors.

Pd/ <b>L1</b>	Yield (%)
$\text{Pd}(\text{acac})_2$ (1.0 mol%) + <b>L1</b> •HCl (2.0 mol%)	65
( <b>L1</b> )Pd(acac)Cl (1.0 mol%)	61
( <b>L1</b> )Pd(allyl)Cl (1.0 mol%)	76

We then carried out some analyses to verify the properties of **L1**. Figure 1 shows the time-course of the Suzuki–Miyaura coupling of **1a** with **2a** catalysed by 5.0 mol%Pd/BrettPhos and 1.0 mol%Pd/**L1**. The former system turned out to be deactivated within 3 h,<sup>13</sup> whereas the coupling proceeded with the latter system much faster and the yield of **3a** kept increasing even after 4 h. These reaction profiles obviously revealed two

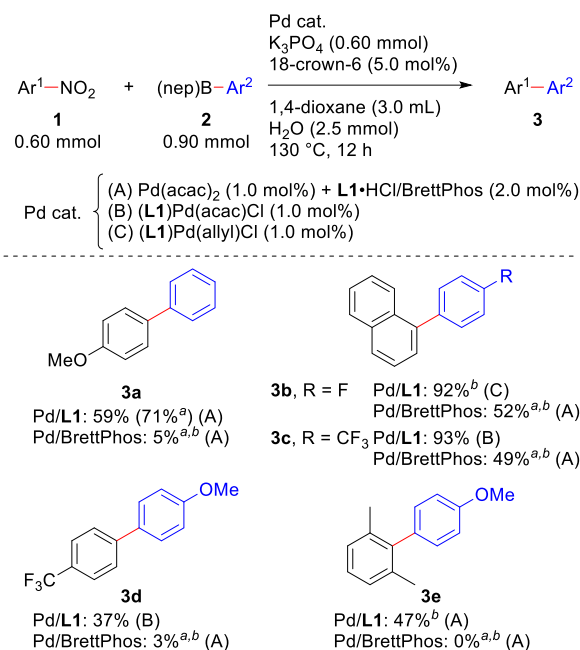
significant effects associated with **L1**: rate-acceleration and longer catalyst lifetime. The higher reaction rate was also supported by DFT calculations. The activation barrier for the rate-limiting oxidative addition of **1a** to (**L1**)Pd<sup>0</sup> was calculated to be 27.2 kcal/mol, which was smaller than that to (BrettPhos)Pd<sup>0</sup> (30.1 kcal/mol).<sup>14</sup> This difference was likely to derive from their HOMO energies. The higher HOMO level of (**L1**)Pd<sup>0</sup> could enable the faster oxidative addition of the Ar–NO<sub>2</sub> bond (see Supporting Information for details). Experimentally, a large difference of %V<sub>Bur</sub><sup>15</sup> between (BrettPhos)AuCl and (**L1**)AuCl was noted (59.5% vs. 51.9%,<sup>9i</sup> respectively), illustrating that **L1** occupied less space around the Pd center, possibly allowing easier access of the substrate to Pd than with BrettPhos. Furthermore, the rigid skeleton of **L1** could inhibit its flip in the coordination sphere, unlike BrettPhos which could show two different coordination modes. This rigidity could partly contribute to the robustness of (**L1**)Pd system in collaboration with reluctance to oxidation by nitroarenes.



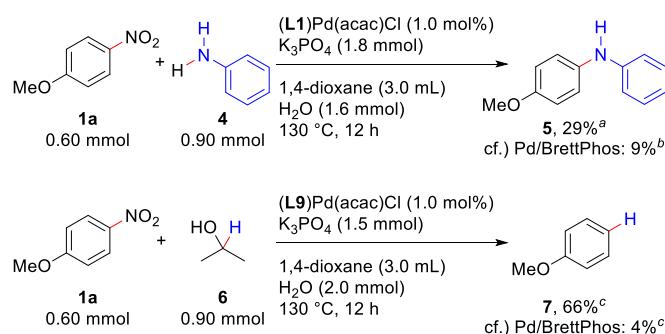
**Figure 1.** Time-courses of the coupling of 4-nitroanisole (**1a**) and phenylboronic acid (**2a**).

We also checked the reactivity of the new catalyst to several other substrate sets (Scheme 3). The use of boronic acid neopentylglycol ester in combination with a catalyst derived from Pd(acac)<sub>2</sub> and **L1**•HCl slightly improved the yield of **3a**. Couplings of nitronaphthalene and F-containing arylboronic acids proceeded very smoothly to give **3b** and **3c**. A nitroarene bearing an electron-withdrawing trifluoromethyl group could be reacted, though the yield of biaryl **3d** was relatively low as observed in our original report.<sup>7a</sup> In all the cases, the new catalytic system performed much better than 1 mol% Pd/BrettPhos. Moreover, 2,6-dimethylnitrobenzene, which was too sterically demanding to cross-couple under the previous conditions, afforded biaryl **3e** by the Pd/**L1** catalyst, possibly due to the reduced %V<sub>Bur</sub> of **L1** compared with BrettPhos.

The Pd/NHC system developed herein catalysed not only the Suzuki–Miyaura coupling, but also the Buchwald–Hartwig amination and reductive denitration of nitroarenes (Scheme 4). Aniline (**4**) could be coupled with **1a** to afford diarylamine **5** by using 1.0 mol% (**L1**)Pd(acac)Cl as a catalyst precursor. Denitration of **1a** proceeded well with (**L9**)Pd(acac)Cl, delivering anisole (**7**) in 66% yield. Both reactions again afforded the products in yields much higher than those catalysed by 1 mol% Pd/BrettPhos.



**Scheme 3.** Scope of the Suzuki–Miyaura coupling of nitroarenes. <sup>a</sup>NMR yields determined using 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene as an internal standard. <sup>b</sup>Ar<sup>2</sup>–B(OH)<sub>2</sub> was used instead of Ar<sup>2</sup>–B(nep).



**Scheme 4.** The Buchwald–Hartwig amination and reductive denitration of nitroarenes. <sup>a</sup>Isolated yield. <sup>b</sup>NMR yield determined using 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene as an internal standard. <sup>c</sup>GC yields determined using *n*-C<sub>13</sub>H<sub>28</sub> as an internal standard.

In conclusion, we have developed new reaction conditions employing imidazo[1,5-a]pyridinylidene as NHC ligands for the cross-coupling reactions of nitroarenes. The Pd/NHC catalysts showed much higher activity than the Pd/BrettPhos system. Some insights into the reasons for the improved performance by the Pd/NHC catalyst are shown in terms of experimental and theoretical studies. Further applications of the Pd/NHC catalyst to other reactions are in progress.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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- Although we confirmed that the hydroxymethyl group of **L20** was lost by <sup>1</sup>H NMR, its fate and the reason for the higher activity compared with **L19** were unclear.
- BrettPhos was completely consumed to give BrettPhos oxide (~80%) and a certain amount of biaryl via C(sp<sup>2</sup>)-P bond cleavage.
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