Exploring the quality of protein structural models from a Bayesian perspective

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Abstract

On the present work, we explore how ideas and practices common in Bayesian modeling can be applied in the context of protein structure assessment. We feature two different but related types of models in this work. The first is statistical while the second is related to the 3D structure of proteins. We fit a Bayesian hierarchical linear model to experimental and theoretical $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts. Based on the premise that evaluation of the Bayesian statistical model's fit may reveal aspects of the quality of a 3D protein structural model, we propose two complementary approaches for its evaluation: 1) in terms of the expected differences between experimental and posterior predicted values; 2) in terms of the *leave-one-out* cross validation point-wise predictive accuracy computed from the hierarchical Bayesian models. As the expected differences are unknown from theory alone, empirical reference densities computed from a data set of high quality protein structures are used to provide context for those differences. Finally, we present visualizations that can help interpret all these comparisons. The analyses presented in this article are aimed to aid in detecting problematic residues or regions in protein structures. The code used in this paper is available on: `https://github.com/BIOS-IMASL/Hierarchical-Bayes-NMR-Validation`. We encourage others to make use of this code to reproduce our analysis, perform a similar analysis on proteins of interest and improve over our proposal, either by expanding the hierarchical linear models or including other observables to complement or replace $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts.

Introduction

Bayesian statistics offers very suitable theoretical advantages for developing models involving bio-molecular structural data and it has been applied in numerous tools and methods in this context [1–6]. Given the growing availability

of experimental data for bio-molecules, Bayesian models guarantee to adapt the estimated uncertainty to new data. Furthermore, Bayesian methods are capable of accounting for errors and noise of variable source and nature, which is suitable for working with bio-molecular experimental data [7].

In statistics, partially pooling data means to separate observations into groups, while allowing the groups to remain somehow linked in order to *influence each other*. In a Bayesian setting, such sharing is achieved naturally through hierarchical modeling. In hierarchical models (also called multilevel models), parameters of the *prior* distributions are shared among groups, inducing dependencies and allowing them to effectively *share information* [8–10]. Advantages of hierarchical Bayesian modelling include obtaining model parameter estimates for each group as well as for the total population. Also, using common *prior* distributions helps preventing the models over-fit [11].

In this study, we fit Bayesian models to experimental $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts, although the proposed approach can be extended to experimental data from other NMR experiments or even other structure determination techniques. We focus specifically on $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts because they have proven to be informative at the residue level and have been used in protein structure determination and validation in previous work by us and others [12–15]. Another promising aspect of working with $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts is that their theoretical counterparts, can be computed with high accuracy using quantum-chemical methods [13].

In the present study, we propose two complementary approaches for the evaluation of protein structural models (hereafter structures). Both are related to different ways of analysing the results of a Bayesian hierarchical linear model (hereafter model) that links experimental and theoretical $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts. For the first approach, we compare structures in terms of their residuals (i.e. the difference between the observed and posterior predicted values). To ease the comparison, we put the residuals in the context of reference densities which are pre-computed from a data set of high quality protein structures. In the second approach, we evaluate the statistical model's fit in terms of its predictive accuracy. Specifically, we use the Expected Log-point-wise Predictive Density (ELPD) estimated by Pareto-smooth-importance sampling leave-one-out cross validation (PSIS-LOO-CV), LOO for short [16, 17]. Exact leave-one-out cross-validation requires to re-fit a model n times, with n being the size of the data set (i.e. the number of $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts). LOO offers an accurate, reliable and fast estimate of the out-of-sample prediction accuracy (prediction accuracy computed from data not used to train the model) without requiring to re-fit the model.

We expect the methods and visualizations presented here to be adopted by protein scientists in order to help them evaluate the quality of a given structure. This may include the structure determination process before structure deposition at the Protein Data Bank, or even after deposition, such as evaluating a structures quality prior to further research like performing docking or template-based modeling.

Methods and software

Reference data set

A reference data set of 111 high quality protein structures was obtained from the Protein Data Bank (PDB) [18]. Each structure in this set has a resolution $\leqslant$ 2.0 Å and R-factors $\leqslant$ 0.25. The structures do not contain coordinates for DNA and/or RNA molecules. Additionally, every protein in our set has a corresponding entry at the Biological Magnetic Resonance Bank (BMRB) from which experimental $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift data was obtained [19]. Theoretical $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift data was computed from the Cartesian coordinates of each protein in this set, using *Che*Shift-2 [15].

Target structures

Experimental and theoretical $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift data was obtained for two structures of protein Ubiquitin under PDB ids: 1UBQ and 1D3Z [20, 21]. Code id.: 1UBQ corresponds to an X-ray crystallography determined structure of Ubiquitin, while 1D3Z corresponds to an NMR determined structure. The latter contains ten different conformations. We computed and averaged the $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift for those 10 conformations. Additionally, the experimental $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift set used in this analysis is taken from BMRB entry N°: 6457, and is the same experimental data set used in the NMR determination of 1D3Z. We notice that in this study, the same experimental $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift set was used for both structures, but the theoretical $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift set is different for each structure, given that is was obtained from the Cartesian coordinates of the PDB entries 1UBQ and 1D3Z. This particular data set construction, allows us to compare 1D3Z and 1UBQ based solely on the differences between the 3D coordinates of their structures.

Hierarchical linear model

A Bayesian hierarchical linear regression model was fitted to the experimental and theoretical $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts contained in the reference data set. The data was normalized before fitting by subtracting the empirical mean and dividing by the empirical standard deviation. The data grouping criterion was amino acid side-chain, i.e., the model divides the data set into 19 groups (one for each amino acid), with Cysteine being excluded given that *Che*Shift-2 does not offer reliable calculations for this amino acid. The full model is described by expression 1 using standard statistical notation and it is also represented in Figure 1 in Kruschke's diagrams [22].

$$\alpha_\sigma \sim \mathcal{HN}(1)$$
$$\beta_\sigma \sim \mathcal{HN}(1)$$
$$\alpha_r \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \alpha_\epsilon)$$
$$\beta_r \sim \mathcal{HN}(\beta_\epsilon) \tag{1}$$
$$\epsilon \sim \mathcal{HN}(1)$$
$$\mu_r = \alpha_r + \beta_r \mathrm{CSt}_r$$
$$\mathrm{CSe}_r \sim \mathcal{N}(\mu_r, \epsilon)$$

Where $\mathcal{HN}(1)$ stands for half-normal distribution with standard deviation 1 and $\mathcal{N}(0, \sigma)$ is a normal distribution with mean 0 and standard deviation σ. CSt_r represents theoretical $^{13}\mathrm{C}^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts and CSe_r the experimental ones. The sub index r denotes each of the 19 groups.

Figure 1: Krushke diagram representing the hierarchical linear model featured in this work.

Model 1 was also used for the target structures 1D3Z and 1UBQ.

Computation of the posterior predictive distribution of $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts

From the fitted hierarchical model, we compute the posterior predictive distribution, that is the distribution of $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts as predicted by the statistical model. We will refer to this set as corrected $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts. Then, we compute the difference between the corrected and experimental $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts from the reference data set for each of the 19 most common amino acids present in proteins (with Cysteine excluded as previously explained). Intuitively, the reference densities are an approximation to the expected distribution of the difference between experimental and corrected $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts. The difference between corrected and experimental $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts was also computed for the target structures, where the corrected set was defined from the posterior predictive distribution of the model fitted to the structure's $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift data.

Model comparison and Cross Validation

When faced with more than one model explaining the same data, it is natural to ask which model is the best. Or more broadly, how are models different from each other and what they have in common. One way to asses a model is through its predictions. In order to do so, we can compare a model's predictions to experimental data. If we use the same experimental data used to fit the model, i.e. we compute the within-sample error, we may become overconfident of our model. The most simple solution is to compute the out-of-sample error, this is the error that a model makes when evaluated on data not used to fit it. Unfortunately, leaving a portion of the data aside just for validation is most often than not a very expensive luxury. NMR structure validation is clearly one such example.

The log predictive density has an important role in model comparison because of its connection to the Kullback-Leibler divergence, a measure of closeness between two probability distributions [11]. For historical reasons, measures of predictive accuracy are referred to as information criteria and they are a collection of diverse methods that allow to estimate the out-of-sample error without requiring external data. In a Bayesian context one such measure is PSIS-LOO-CV (LOO) as previously mentioned in the introduction [16,17,23]. In the next subsections, we will briefly explain some of the details related to LOO, specially those more relevant for the current work.

LOO

The cross-validated leave-one-out predictive distribution $p(y_i \mid y_{-i})$ (or most commonly its logarithm) can be used to asses the out-of-sample prediction accuracy. In the present work, y_i represents the model predicted i $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts and y_{-i} represents the complete set of $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shift except the ith one.

Computing $p(y_i \mid y_{-i})$ can become costly as it required to fit a model n times (where n is the data set's size). Fortunately, the leave-one-out predictive distribution can be approximated using importance sampling. The variance of these importance weights can be large or even infinite, LOO applies a smoothing procedure that involves replacing the largest 20% importance weights with values from an estimated Pareto distribution. The shape parameter $\hat{\kappa}$ of such Pareto distribution can be used to detect highly influential observations, i.e. observations that have a large effect on the predictive distribution when they are left out. Values above $\hat{\kappa}= 0.5$ can indicate problems but in practice it has been observed that the method has good performance for values of $\hat{\kappa}$ up to 0.7. In the Results section, we show how this diagnostic can be useful in the context of protein structure validation.

LOO-PIT

LOO-PIT is obtained by comparing the observed data y to posterior predicted data $\tilde{y}$. The comparison is done point-wise. We have:

$$p_i = P(\tilde{y}_i \leq y_i \mid y_{-i})$$

Intuitively, LOO-PIT is computing the point-wise probability that the observed data y_i has a lower value than the posterior predicted data $\tilde{y}_i$. For a well calibrated model the expected distribution of p is the uniform distribution over the $[0, 1]$ interval, i.e. a standard uniform distribution. The advantage of using the leave-one-out predictive distribution instead of just the predictive distribution is that with the former, we are not using the data twice (once to fit the model and once to validate it) [11, 24].

PIT makes reference to the Probability Integral Transform, also known as the universality of the uniform distribution. PIT states that given a random variable with an arbitrary continuous distribution, it is possible to create a uniform distribution in the interval $[0, 1]$. Given a continuous random variable X for which the cumulative distribution function is F_X, then $F_X(X) \sim Unif(0, 1)$.

Expected Log Predictive Density

Finally, we can compare models point-wise using their Expected Log Predictive Density (ELPD), where the expectation is taken over the whole posterior. In other words, the predictions take into account the parameters uncertainty, as expressed by the statistical model and data. Notice that the value of the ELPD is not useful in itself, but we can use it to compare the relative fit of residues within a same protein and/or to compare the relative fit of residues from two or more structures, as long as they are fitted to the same data.

Software

All Bayesian models were solved using PyMC3 [25]. ArviZ was used to compute LOO, ELPD and related plots [26]. PyMOL was used to visualize 3D protein

structures [27].

Results

In this work we explore the quality of protein structures using $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts and two Bayesian approaches. The first approach analyses differences between corrected and experimental $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts. This is highly appealing as the comparison is done using a familiar metric for protein scientist, specially NMR spectroscopists. By using a linear regression model an effective reference value for the $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts was directly obtained. This is important as wrong referencing can be an issue when working with Chemical Shifts. The estimated reference value is unique for every protein in our data set. Moreover, by using a hierarchical model we obtain a correction specific for every one of the 19 most common amino acids that constitute proteins (as already mentioned Cysteine is excluded). The second approach uses the LOO predictive distribution, which is a general and widely accepted way to assess Bayesian statistical models [11,16,17]. We think both methods complement each other and their combined usage can be of great usefulness for spectroscopists and protein scientists in general.

Difference between experimental $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts and corrected $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts

Using reference densities on the differences between corrected and experimental $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts obtained from high quality structures can help contextualize particular differences found in any given NMR structure. Resulting in a straightforward way to asses how problematic is the resolved structure for each residue.

The reference densities for the amino acid types present in Ubiquitin are plotted in light blue in Figure 2. As expected, these distributions has zero-mean but most importantly they have different variances. Even when we did not perform any formal test to evaluate if and how these densities depart from a Gaussian distribution we can see that most of the reference densities are skewed or have more than one peak (most likely reflecting sub-populations of α-helix and β-strands). These distributions also reflect variations among amino acids related to natural abundance as well as chemical features. For example Glycine, which is the most abundant amino acid and the one spanning the broader regions of the Ramachandran plot, has the smoothest curve. Given all these particularities, comparing differences between observed and corrected $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts in terms of a single common variance could be miss leading. Instead, we use quantiles computed per each amino acid's distribution. Specifically we used the 0.05, 0.2, 0.8 and 0.95 quantiles. Thus, we divide the reference densities into a central 60% (between the 0.2 and 0.8 quantiles) a 30% (15% between 0.05 and 0.2 and another 15% between 0.8 and 0.95) and finally the remaining 10% for those value below 0.05 and above 0.95. In Figure 2 we can also see

the differences for every residue in structures 1D3Z and 1UBQ represented as rhombuses and dots below each reference density. We use color to help interpret such differences, green if the $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts difference is found in the central 60%, yellow if it is found in the 30% around the central values and red if it is found in the 10% most extreme values. It is important to note that even when a residue is marked red that does not automatically indicates it is a poorly determined residue, as in fact we expect that 10% of the residues from good quality structures to appear red using the presented method. Instead we can considered them as residues that may deserve further attention [15].

As we can see the differences in general are small between the two target structures, with a few exceptions such as Isoleucine 30 and Leucine 56. Figure 3 uses the same color-schema from Figure 2 in the context of a 3D structural model. The accompanying code can automatically generate a file containing the colored structures as in Figure 2 and can be loaded with PyMOL or VMD [28].

LOO predictive distribution

As previously mentioned the LOO predictive distribution is a general way to assess Bayesian statistical models and is not related to proteins structures in any direct way [11,16,17]. For a calibrated model, i.e. a model which predictive distribution is in good agreement with the observed data, the distribution of the LOO probability integral transform (LOO-PIT) is uniform. As this only holds asymptotically, a way to empirically assess calibration for a finite sample is to compare the density of LOO-PIT against the density of uniform samples of the same size as the data used to compute LOO-PIT. Such comparison is done in Figure 4 for 1D3Z and 1UBQ. We can see that both models seem to be overall well calibrated but both models seems to have a slightly positive slope, with less predicted lower values than expected and more higher values than expected. In other words the predictive distributions are slightly biased compared to the training data, specially for 1D3Z which it is also showing a small excess for values around the middle.

Analysis of the $\hat{\kappa}$ parameter

The $\hat{\kappa}$ parameter can help spotting influential observations, i.e. observations that has a large effect on predictions if removed. The higher this value, the most influential the observation will be, with values above 0.7 being of particular interest. Figure 5 shows that for 1D3Z the residues with $\hat{\kappa} > 0.7$ are Serine 20, Valine 26 and Isoleucine 30. While for 1UBQ these are Alanine 28 and Tyrosine 59.

Expected Log Predictive Density

Figure 6 shows the ELPD for 1D3Z, 1UBQ and the difference between them. The largest difference is observed for residue Isoleucine 30 that is shown as in

Figure 2: The reference densities in light blue are used as a representation for the expected differences between experimental and corrected $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts in high quality NMR resolved structures. The dots and rhombuses represent the $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts differences for the PDB entries 1D3Z and 1UBQ respectively.

better agreement in terms of $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts in 1UBQ than 1D3Z, the rest of the residues are on-par.

It is worth noting that Isoleucine 30 has a $\hat{\kappa}$ value ≥ 0.7 in 1D3Z (see Figure 5). It was also located in the extreme quantiles on Figures 2 and 3 for both target structures. Also, it showed the largest ELPD difference (see Figure 6).

Conclusions

We have presented a collection of visualizations based on Bayesian statistical models and tools applied to NMR protein structure assessment. Except for Figures 2 and 3 the rest of the visualizations have already been adopted in the Bayesian community by many of its practitioners and we do not claim

Figure 3: 3D structure of 1D3Z (left) and 1UBQ (right). The amino acid residues are colored according to the placement of their $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shift difference respective to the reference densities in Figure 2.

Figure 4: LOO-PIT for 1D3Z and 1UBQ. The thick line is the observed LOO-PIT density and the thin lines in the background represent simulations from the standard uniform distribution in the $[0, 1]$ interval for a data set of the same size as the one used to computed LOO-PIT.

novelty about them. Nevertheless, we consider such visualizations as potentially useful additions to the current toolbox for protein structure validation. Even if these visualizations and tools are not novel we must notice that we are using them in a slightly different way, as they are used in standard Bayesian model comparison routines. That is to say, the statistical models are kept fixed and the 3D structural models vary. Thus, when observing a potential problem we are directly attributing it to the structure's quality, as we consider that the hierarchical linear model and the method to compute $^{13}C^\alpha$ Chemical Shifts are

Figure 5: $\hat{k}$ values for every residue in 1D3Z (left) and 1UBQ (right). Residues with $\hat{k}$ above 0.7 are labeled.

Figure 6: Expected Log Predictive Density for 1D3Z (left), 1UBQ (center) and the difference between both structures.

in general good enough for our purposes. Of course, such assumptions may not be correct and thus we encourage researchers to evaluate other possible models, fitting them to a different type of experimental data or even different methods to compute $^{13}C^{\alpha}$ Chemical Shifts. Finally, we want to emphasize that the tools and visualization presented here are not intended to provide a categorical answer about the quality of proteins but instead help experts to explore the quality of structural models and, when possible, make improvement of such models.

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