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# Electrooxidative dearomatization of biaryls: synthesis of tri- and difluoromethylated spiro[5.5]trienones†

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Radical spirocyclization *via* dearomatization has emerged as an attractive strategy for the rapid synthesis of structurally diverse spiro molecules. We report the use of electrochemistry to perform an oxidative dearomatization of biaryls leading to tri- and difluoromethylated spiro[5.5]trienones in a user friendly undivided cell set-up and a constant current mode. The catalyst- and chemical oxidant-free dearomatization procedure features ample scope, and employs electricity as the green and sole oxidant.

## Introduction

The development of new approaches for the construction of CF<sub>3</sub>- or CF<sub>2</sub>H-containing target molecules is becoming increasingly important owing to the growing applications of organo-fluorinated compounds in *inter alia* pharmaceutical and agrochemical industries.<sup>1–3</sup> Thus, the incorporation of fluoroalkyl groups into organic molecules can significantly improve their physical, chemical, and biological properties, such as permeability, bioavailability, and metabolic stability.<sup>4–6</sup> Although a multitude of methods have been developed for the preparation of trifluoromethylated or difluoromethylated compounds by radical addition to unsaturated bonds,<sup>7</sup> a protocol for directly introducing CF<sub>3</sub> or CF<sub>2</sub>H onto spiro[5.5]trienone has thus far proven elusive, despite these motifs being prevalent in a number of natural products and bioactive molecules (Fig. 1).

Electrochemistry has surfaced as an attractive technique for the discovery of new modes of reactivity and transformations that are not readily accessible with chemical reagents.<sup>8</sup> As radical spirocyclization by dearomatization of biaryls is an attractive strategy for the rapid construction of spiro[5.5] molecules,<sup>9,11b</sup> we questioned whether the efficiency and mildness noted in the CF<sub>3</sub>-radical formation could be translated into an electrooxidative biaryl dearomatization strategy. However, significant challenges would need to be overcome (Fig. 1). (1)

Regioselectivity between 5-*exo*-trig, 6-*exo*-trig and 7-*endo*-trig cyclization needs to be controlled. (2) The low reactivity of alkynes towards fluoroalkyl radicals needs to be addressed. Compared to the radical addition onto alkenes,<sup>10</sup> alkyne functionalization by radical addition is more challenging.<sup>11</sup> Herein, we report an unprecedented dearomatization of biarylnones under green and operationally-simple electrochemical conditions. The salient features of our strategy comprise the following: (a) the first efficient dearomatization of biaryls to CF<sub>3</sub>-containing spiro[5.5]trienones, (b) a most user-friendly undivided cell set-up, (c) simple reaction conditions devoid of a redox mediator, (d) the absence of catalysts and chemical oxidants, and (e) high regioselectivity.

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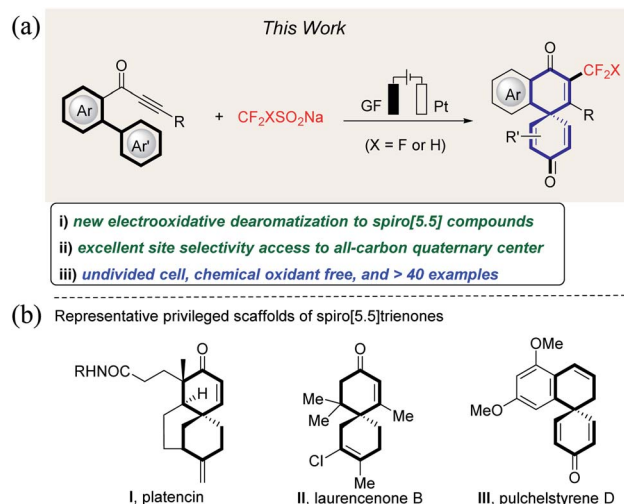
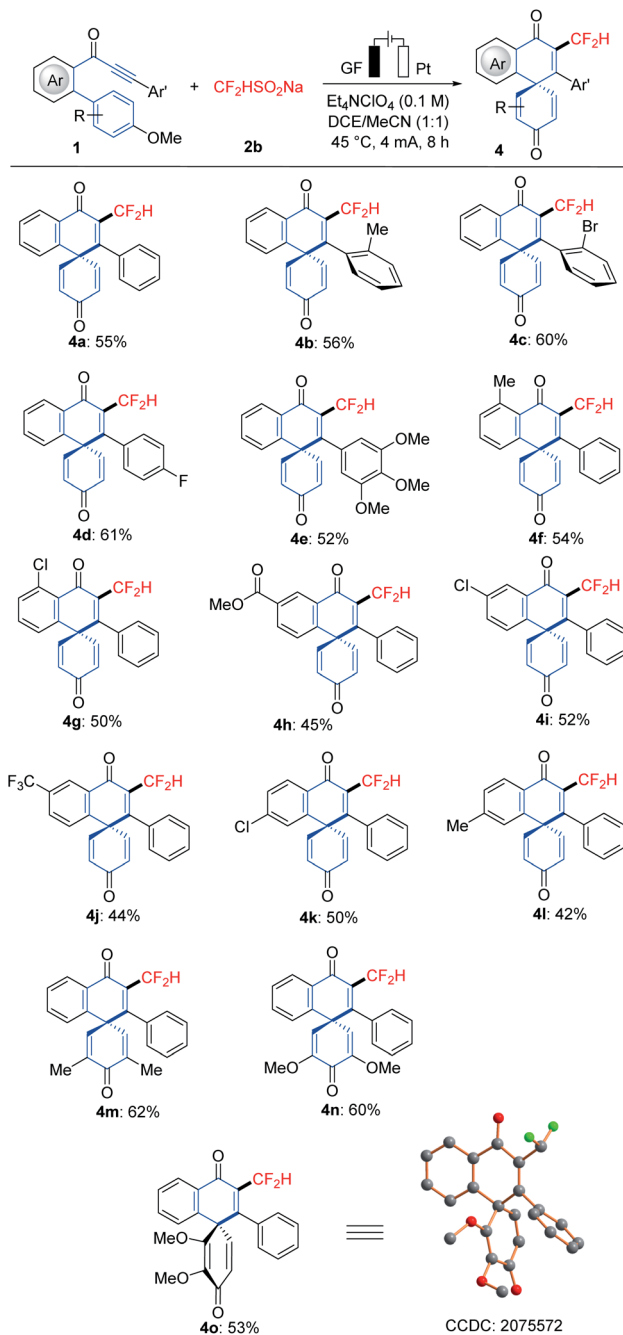


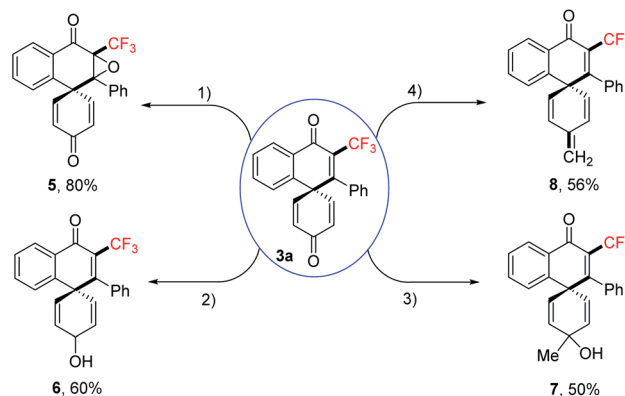
Fig. 1 Electrooxidative biaryl dearomatization: (a) reaction design and (b) selected examples of bioactive spiro compounds.





Scheme 2 Scope of difluoromethylated spiro[5.5]trienones 4.

polysubstituted substrates. A naphthyl substituent was also compatible (**3m**). Substitutions on the phenome scaffold were next examined. Substrates bearing either electron-withdrawing or electron-donating groups did not significantly alter the reaction outcome and the spiro compounds **3** were efficiently obtained (**3o–3x**). As depicted, the dearomatization approach was compatible with several functional groups, such as chloro, bromo, ether, nitro and ester. A heterocyclic substrate was also applicable in this electrooxidative transformation to afford the corresponding product **3y** in a moderate yield. It is noteworthy that a substrate with a substituent at the *ortho*-position of OMe (**1z**) also formed the desired compound **3z**.<sup>16</sup>

Scheme 3 Reaction conditions: (1)  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  (1.5 equiv.),  $\text{Na}_2\text{CO}_3$  (1.5 equiv.), EtOH, 45 °C, 2 h. (2) DIBAL (1.0 equiv.), THF, -78 °C, 3 h. (3)  $\text{CH}_3\text{MgCl}$  (2.0 equiv.), THF, room temperature, 3 h. (4) Methyltriphenylphosphonium bromide (2.0 equiv.), *t*-BuOK (2.0 equiv.), THF, room temperature, 6 h.

As the difluoromethyl group ( $\text{CF}_2\text{H}$ ) can serve as a hydrogen bond donor, it has been employed as a lipophilic isostere in drug design for functionalities such as amides, alcohols, thiols and hydroxamic acids.<sup>17</sup> Thus, we turned our attention to electrochemical difluoromethylation/dearomatization with differently substituted biarylnones **1** and  $\text{CF}_2\text{HSO}_2\text{Na}$  (**2b**). Similarly, the electronic properties of arenes Ar and Ar' in substrate **1** did not have distinct influence on the efficiency of the dearomatization, and moderate to good yields of the spiro[5.5]trienones **4** were obtained (Scheme 2). The structure of product **4o** was unambiguously verified by X-ray crystallographic analysis.<sup>15b</sup>

We further demonstrated the synthetic utility and showed that the trifluoromethylated spiro[5.5]trienones are a versatile framework that can be readily transformed into more value-added scaffolds in single step reactions (Scheme 3). The biologically relevant epoxyquinone **5** could be obtained in excellent yield *via* oxidation, while reduction of the ketone selectively furnished alcohol **6**. Alcohol **7** was synthesized by selective addition of Grignard reagent, while alkene **8** could be prepared by a Wittig reaction.

To gain mechanistic insight into this electrochemical dearomatization reaction, the radical clock reaction using (1-cyclopropylvinyl)benzene (**1'**) as the radical-trapping reagent provided the known product **9** in 25% yield (Fig. 2a). Based on these results, a radical mechanism is proposed in Fig. 2c for this electrooxidative dearomatization reaction. First, radical  $\text{CF}_3^{\cdot}$  is generated from **2a** through anodic oxidation. Radical addition of  $\text{CF}_3^{\cdot}$  to C–C triple bonds of **1a** affords a vinyl radical **A**, which undergoes 6-*exo*-trig cyclization to the radical species **B**. Intermediate **B** is reoxidized to oxocarbenium ion **C** at the anode. Finally, the corresponding product **3a** is formed after demethylation. The incorporation of the difluoro moiety proceeds *via* the same mechanism, but the oxidation peak of  $\text{CF}_2\text{HSO}_2\text{Na}$  was found much lower than that of  $\text{CF}_3\text{SO}_2\text{Na}$  by a cyclic voltammetry (CV) experiment.<sup>18</sup> In addition, inspired by the pioneering work of Jiao for 1,2-dichloroethane (DCE) dehydrochlorination,<sup>19</sup> we also found that when the model



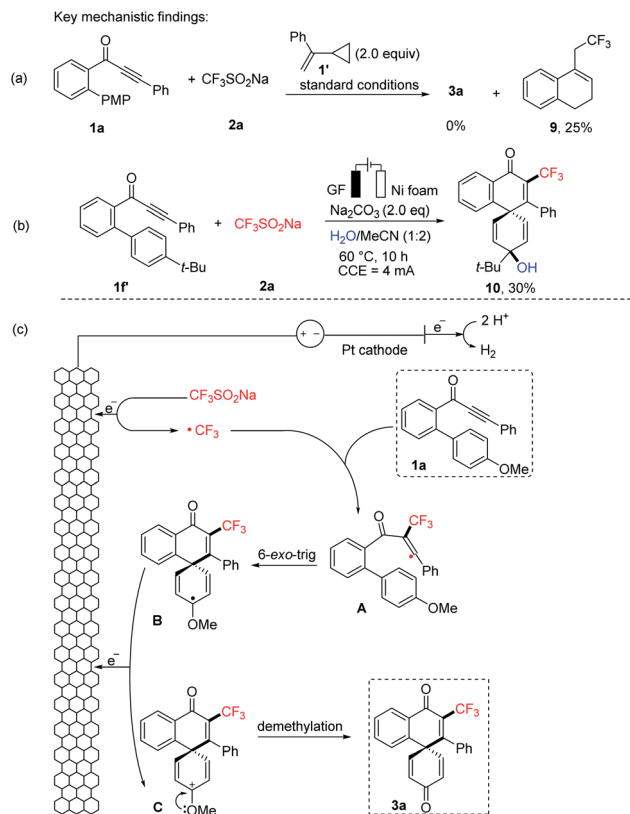


Fig. 2 Mechanistic investigation of the electrooxidative biaryl dearomatization: (a) radical clock experiment, (b) trapping experiment for the key intermediate, and (c) proposed mechanism.

reaction between **1a** and **2a** was performed under the standard conditions, the reaction mixture clearly became acidic as shown by pH measurement (in  $\text{ESI}^+$ ). Hence, we propose that HCl was generated from the dehydrochlorination of DCE. Notably, the analogue of ion C could be trapped by water while changing the reaction solvent system with 1-(4'-(*tert*-butyl)-[1,1'-biphenyl]-2-yl)-3-phenylprop-2-yn-1-one **1f**. The trapping product **10** was here isolated in 30% yield (Fig. 2b).

## Conclusions

In summary, we have developed an efficient approach for the electrochemical dearomatization of biaryls under metal catalyst- and chemical oxidant-free conditions. This green and environmentally friendly strategy showed a broad scope and great compatibility with sensitive functional groups, affording a series of  $\text{CF}_3$ - and  $\text{CF}_2\text{H}$ -substituted spiro[5.5]trienones in moderate to good yields. It represents the first electrooxidative 6-*exo*-trig radical dearomative spirocyclization process, and a plausible mechanism was proposed.

## Data availability

All experimental data, procedures for data analysis and pertinent data sets are provided in the ESI.

## Author contributions

Y. Z. and L. A. conceived the project. Y. Z. and C. M. performed the experiments, Y. Z., J. F. and J. S. analyzed and interpreted the experimental data. Y. Z. and J. S. drafted the paper. G. Z., Y. Z. and L. A. supervised the project. All of the authors discussed the results and contributed to the preparation of the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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