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Tuning the photophysical properties of luminescent lanthanide complexes through regioselective antenna fluorination†

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Carbostyrils monofluorinated in the 3, 5, or 6 positions were synthesised from olefinic precursors via a photochemical isomerisation-cyclisation route, and incorporated into octadentate cyclen triacetate ligands that formed luminescent complexes with Tb(III) and Eu(III). The photophysical properties of the emitters were strongly dependent on the position of the fluorination.

The luminescence of the trivalent lanthanide (Ln) ions is applied in diverse biological and industrial settings ranging from the monitoring of the components of living cells to the thermometric analysis of materials.^{1,2} Ln(III) luminescence is often sensitised by a light-harvesting antenna to avoid the need for direct excitation of the Laporte-forbidden 4f–4f transitions.³ Optimisation of energy transfer (EnT) to the Ln(III) and elimination of processes that quench the antenna and Ln(III) excited states are essential for bright emitters.

Photoinduced electron transfer (PeT) from the excited antenna to Ln(III) is feasible for several Lns,^{4,5} and for Eu(III) emission it can be an effective luminescence quenching process.⁶ PeT is suppressed when the antenna is less reducing. Antenna substitution with electron-withdrawing groups (*e.g.* with CF₃, Fig. 1)^{4,5} or protonation^{7,8} can increase the Eu(III) luminescence quantum yield, but may have unintended consequences on the antenna excited state energies.^{5,9,10} Ln sensitisation commonly takes place *via* the antenna singlet (S₁) and triplet excited states (T₁). Even subtle changes to the antenna may alter the S₁ and T₁ energies and EnT. In the previous examples both antenna trifluoromethylation^{4,5} and protonation proved detrimental to Tb(III) emission.⁸

Here, we have prepared three monofluorinated 7-aminocarbostyryl regioisomers. Electronegative fluorine was

expected to decrease PeT by making the antenna less reducing, a strategy that complements the use of C–F bonds to replace the more efficiently quenching C–H oscillators.¹¹ Fluorination has additional potential benefits. Fluorine is a hydrogen isostere conferring metabolic stability, H-bond acceptor ability, and altered lipophilicity on pharmaceuticals.¹² Diagnostic applications of fluorinated probes include multimodal¹³ and responsive¹⁴ systems. ¹⁹F-MRI is a promising low-background technique,¹⁵ and ¹⁸F is an attractive PET label.^{16,17}

Fluorinated carbostyrils were incorporated into do3a (1,4,7,10-tetraazacyclododecane-1,4,7-triacetate)-based octadentate ligands to enable comparison with previously reported structures.^{4,5} The Eu(III), Tb(III), and Gd(III) chelates of the ligands were characterised using ¹H NMR spectroscopy, cyclic voltammetry, and UV-vis absorption and steady-state and time-resolved emission spectroscopies. Our results show fluorination meaningfully impacts the antenna and Ln(III) photophysical properties, and substitution at a remote antenna position could even influence the excited state behaviour of the Ln(III).

Fluorinated antennae were synthesised as shown in Scheme 1 and Schemes S1–S6 (ESI†). The procedures were

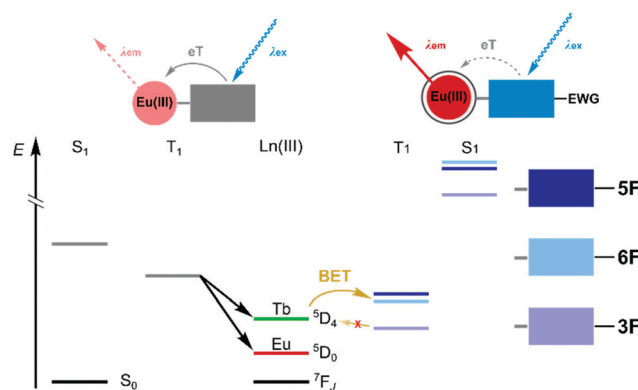


Fig. 1 Decreased PeT quenching of Eu(III) luminescence through antenna substitution with electron-withdrawing group(s) (EWG), and its effects on the S₁ and T₁ energies.

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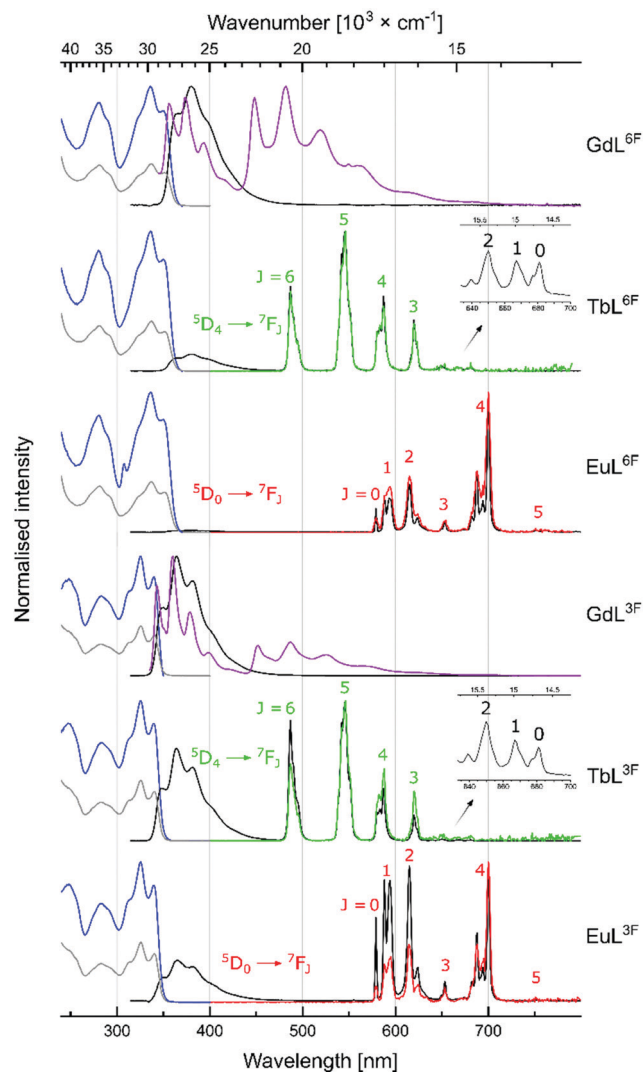


Fig. 2 Normalised absorption (grey, 298 K), excitation [blue, λ_{em} = 380 nm (**GdL^{6F}**), λ_{em} = 364 nm (**GdL^{3F}**), λ_{em} = 546 nm (Tb), λ_{em} = 615 nm (Eu), 298 K], steady-state emission at 298 K [black, λ_{ex} = 335 nm (**LnL^{6F}**), λ_{ex} = 325 nm (**LnL^{3F}**)], steady-state emission at 77 K [purple, λ_{ex} = 335 nm (**LnL^{6F}**), λ_{ex} = 325 nm (**LnL^{3F}**)] and time-resolved emission [green (Tb), red (Eu), λ_{ex} = 335 nm (**LnL^{6F}**), λ_{ex} = 325 nm (**LnL^{3F}**), 298 K] spectra of **LnL^F**.

antenna photophysical properties in **LnL** without interference from photo- or redox-active Ln(III). Carbostyryl excitation in **GdL** returned antenna fluorescence that was blue-shifted and less intense than that of the corresponding 7-aminocarbostyryl (Fig. S33–S36, ESI†). Φ_L was largest for **GdL^{3F}** (13%) and smallest for **GdL^{6F}** (5.9%), with $\Phi_L(\text{GdL}^{5F}) = 6.1\%$ and $\Phi_L(\text{GdL}^H) = 7.6\%$ in between. Steady state emission spectra were recorded at 77 K to determine the antenna T_1 (Fig. S45–S48, ESI†). Notably, fluorination in all three investigated positions lowered the antenna T_1 from 22 500 cm^{-1} in **GdL^H**. **GdL^{3F}** had the lowest energy T_1 (22 100 cm^{-1}), and **GdL^{5F}** had the highest, at only 300 cm^{-1} higher energy. These are small but impactful differences. The 5D_4 emitting level of Tb(III) is located at 20 400 cm^{-1} , and the antenna T_1 must be at least $\sim 2000 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ higher energy to avoid thermal back energy transfer (BET). Thus, **TbL^{3F}** and possibly even **TbL^{6F}** (but likely not **TbL^{5F}**) may be susceptible to BET. Tb(III) complexes that undergo BET are oxygen sensitive, and are useful for O_2 -sensing and cytotoxic singlet oxygen generation.^{19,20} T_1 are $\sim 5000 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ higher than the emissive 5D_0 level of Eu(III), which is suitable for Eu(III) sensitization.²¹ T_1 in **LnL^F** are closer to the accepting 5D_2 Eu(III) level (21 500 cm^{-1}) than in **LnL^H**, which may result in better energy transfer in the fluorinated complexes.^{21,22}

Excitation of **TbL** and **EuL** at λ_{max} yielded green and red Ln(III) luminescence, respectively (Fig. 2 and Fig. S37–S44, ESI†, Table 2), with residual antenna fluorescence. **TbL** had slightly lower Φ_L than the analogous **GdL** likely due to some antenna S_1 -mediated EnT to Tb(III).⁶ **EuL** had drastically diminished Φ_L , which may be due to a combination of EnT from S_1 , and depopulation of S_1 by PeT. **AcCS^F** oxidation potentials (E_{ox}) were found by cyclic voltammetry as +1.73, +1.86, and +1.77 V (vs. NHE, for **AcCS^{3F}**, **AcCS^{5F}**, **AcCS^{6F}**, respectively); only 5-fluorination made antenna oxidation more difficult than in **AcCS** ($E_{ox} = +1.81 \text{ V}$). PeT was calculated to be slightly less thermodynamically favoured in **EuL^{5F}**, and **EuL^{6F}** than in **EuL^H**, and more favoured in **EuL^{3F}** ($\Delta G(\text{PeT}) = -1.01, -1.14, -0.98$, and -0.97 eV , for **EuL^H**, **EuL^{3F}**, **EuL^{5F}**, and **EuL^{6F}**, respectively (see ESI† for details)). Thus, the effects of fluorination on the antenna S_1 , T_1 and E_{ox} , and in turn on $\Delta G(\text{PeT})$ can be difficult to predict.

Table 2 Photophysical properties of **LnL^F** (Ln = Eu, Tb),^a and τ_{rad} , Φ_{Ln}^{Ln} , and η_{sens} **EuL^F**^b

	Φ_L^{cd} (%)	τ_n (ns)	Φ_{Ln}^c (%)	τ_{rad} (ms)	Φ_{Ln}^{Ln} (%)	η_{sens} (%)
TbL^H	5.1 (67%)	0.21(4)	22.5	—	—	—
TbL^{3F}	8.1 (63%)	0.39(2)	5.6	—	—	—
TbL^{5F}	4.6 (75%)	0.36(3)	21.7	—	—	—
TbL^{6F}	4.6 (78%)	0.25(4), 2.40(3) ^e	16.7	—	—	—
EuL^H	0.261 (3.4%)	—	4.34	5.18 ^g , 4.73 ^h	11.9 ^g , 13.1 ^h	36.2 ^g
EuL^{3F}	0.680 (5.3%)	0.93(6), 0.42(5) ^e	1.09	9.25 ^g , 5.10 ^h	6.7 ^g , 12.3 ^h	16.1 ^g
EuL^{5F}	0.814 (13%)	0.47(6), 1.76(5) ^e	5.05	5.25 ^g , 5.11 ^h	11.5 ^g , 11.8 ^h	43.4 ^g
EuL^{6F}	0.207 (3.5%)	0.20(1), 2.85(5) ^e	5.10	5.28 ^g , 5.19 ^h	11.6 ^g , 11.8 ^h	43.8 ^g

^a [**LnL**] = 10 μM in 10 mM PIPES buffered H_2O , pH 6.5. ^b Determined using the method in ref. 26. I_{tot}/I_{MD} : integral ratio of total Eu-centred corrected emission spectrum (570–800 nm) and $^5D_0 \rightarrow ^7F_1$ band (582–603 nm), $A_{MD,0} = 14.65 \text{ s}^{-1}$, $n = 1.333$ (refractive index),²⁷ $\tau_{obs} = \tau_{H_2O}$. ^c Relative to quinine sulfate ($\Phi = 0.59$) in H_2SO_4 (0.05 M).²³ ^d In parentheses: compared to **GdL** analogue. ^e Biexponential fit better based on χ^2 . ^f Too short to measure. ^g Calculated from the steady-state emission spectra. ^h Calculated from the time-resolved emission spectra.

The Ln(III) luminescence lifetimes ($\tau_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}$) were measured by time-resolved emission spectroscopy. The decays were monoexponential. $\tau_{\text{H}_2\text{O}}$ values varied for Ln = Tb but were almost identical for all **EuL** (~ 0.61 ms) (Table S4, ESI†). The number of Ln(III)-bound water molecules (q) were $q = 1$ for **EuL**. Deviations for **TbL** from $q = 1$ could be due to BET, which makes this method inapplicable,^{24,25} or the result of the typical error of $q \pm 0.5$.

TbL^{5F} and **TbL**^H had the highest Tb-centred luminescence quantum yields ($\Phi_{\text{Ln}} = 21.7\%$ and 22.5% , respectively, values identical within experimental error). The low Φ_{Ln} of **TbL**^{3F} is presumably the result of BET. **EuL**^{5F} and **EuL**^{6F} had $\Phi_{\text{Ln}} \sim 5\%$, which is higher than most Eu(III) complexes with similar structures, i.e. uncharged do3a-based emitters with secondary amide-linked carbostyryl antenna, including **EuL**^H ($\Phi_{\text{Ln}} = 4.34\%$). **EuL**^{3F}, however, had low $\Phi_{\text{Ln}} = 1.09\%$. Unlike **TbL**^{3F}, **EuL**^{3F} does not suffer from BET, therefore, an alternative explanation for the poor performance of this emitter was necessary.

Φ_{Ln} is the product of the intrinsic quantum yield of the Ln(III) ($\phi_{\text{Ln}}^{\text{Ln}}$) and the Ln(III) sensitisation efficiency (η_{sens} , eqn (1)), i.e. the efficiency of Ln(III) excited state population. For Eu(III) $\phi_{\text{Ln}}^{\text{Ln}}$ can be determined from the corrected emission spectrum.²⁶

$$\phi_{\text{Ln}} = \eta_{\text{sens}} \cdot \phi_{\text{Ln}}^{\text{Ln}} = \eta_{\text{sens}} \cdot \frac{\tau_{\text{obs}}}{\tau_{\text{rad}}} \quad (1)$$

In **EuL**^{5F} and **EuL**^{6F} η_{sens} is increased compared to **EuL**^H, presumably due to a combination of the small adjustments in spectral overlap and PeT quenching. **EuL**^{3F} had markedly lower η_{sens} and $\phi_{\text{Ln}}^{\text{Ln}}$ than the other **EuL** (Table 2). The steady-state and time-resolved **EuL**^{3F} emission spectra have different shapes. Eu(III) spectra are sensitive to coordination environment, and these differences indicate the presence of several emissive species.²¹ The signal of the slow-decaying component dominating the time-resolved spectrum resembles the **EuL**^{5F}/**EuL**^{6F}/**EuL**^H spectra. Contribution from the fast-decaying species modifies the steady-state **EuL**^{3F} spectrum. If τ_{obs} is assumed unchanged, the steady-state spectral shape yields a lower overall $\phi_{\text{Ln}}^{\text{Ln}}$ (Table 2). The spectrum of **TbL**^{3F} is similarly time-dependent, but not those of **Eu/TbL**^{5F} and **Eu/TbL**^{6F}. The reasons for the diminished η_{sens} of **EuL**^{3F} are unclear. PeT is more favoured in **EuL**^{3F} than in **EuL**^{5F} and **EuL**^{6F}, and **EuL**^F have much lower Φ_{L} than the corresponding **GdL**^F, which is consistent with PeT quenching. The τ_{fl} of **EuL**^F and **GdL**^F, however, cannot be compared directly. The biexponential decay of the **EuL**^F antenna fluorescence suggested the presence of additional emitters to those seen in **GdL**^F. Further work is therefore needed to understand the effect of fluorination on EnT and PeT.

In conclusion, monofluorinated 7-aminocarbostyryls, obtained via a photochemical cyclisation, were competent sensitisers of Eu(III) and Tb(III) emission. The position of the fluorine had a dramatic impact on the antenna and Ln(III) photophysical properties, rendering the emission oxygen-sensitive (**TbL**^{3F}, **TbL**^{4F}), and increasing (**EuL**^{5F}, **EuL**^{6F}), or decreasing Φ_{Ln} , (**TbL**^{3F}, **TbL**^{6F}, **EuL**^{3F}) compared to non-fluorinated **LnL**^H. 5-Fluorination improved Eu(III) emission without negatively impacting Tb(III) luminescence. Remote fluorination influenced the excited-state behaviour of **LnL**^{3F}. Work towards the 4-fluorinated isomer, and ligands containing other EWGs than fluorine is ongoing.

D. K. did all experiments except the crystallographic analysis, which was done by A. O. K. E. B. designed the project, secured funding, and supervised the work. All authors contributed to data analysis and manuscript writing.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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