Semantic Index of Phenotypic and Genotypic Data

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Project Goals: The goal of this project is to develop a semantic data resource that can serve as a basis for predictive modeling of microbial phenotype. The core technical objectives are twofold: (1) to build a database of normalized phenotypic descriptions (observational data) using the primary taxonomic literature of bacterial and archaeal type strains, and (2) to construct an ontology with reasoning capabilities to make accurate phenotypic and environmental inferences based on that data. This project is tightly coupled with ongoing DOE projects (the Genomic Encyclopedia of Bacteria and Archaea, the Microbial Earth Project, the Community Science Project) and with two key publications, Standards in Genomic Sciences (SIGS) and the International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology (IJSEM).

Predictive modeling of cells and metacommunities requires high quality input data, but not all data are of similar quality nor are they amenable to computational analysis without extensive cleaning, interpretation and normalization. Key among those are phenotypic data, which are more complex than sequence data, occur in a wide variety of forms, often use complex and non-uniform descriptors and are scattered about specialized databases and scientific and technical literature. Incorporating phenotypic information into metagenomic analyses requires expertise in harvesting, modeling and interpreting these data.

The Semantic Index of Phenotypic and Genotypic Data will address this problem by providing a resource of reference phenotypic data for all validly published type strains of Bacteria and Archaea, based on concepts and observational data drawn from the primary taxonomic literature. In the Phase I project we developed software to construct and analyze a corpus of this literature and to extract putative feature domain vocabularies comprising approximately 40,000 candidate phenotypic terms used in new and emended descriptions of the 13,213 distinct type strains of Bacteria and Archaea. In Phase II, these vocabularies have served as the basis for developing a phenotypic ontology, a repository of phenotypic data that is undergoing normalization of phenotypic descriptions for each species. We have found that many of the phenotypes applied to microbes describe a combination of quantitative environmental conditions and qualitative growth and metabolic capabilities. Such terms have proven difficult to implement in query systems because of their context-based interpretations and conceptual overlap across multiple feature domains. We have furthered our work on novel design patterns for ontology development [1] that address these problems and remove barriers to machine reasoning and complex query

answering over these complex terms, while preserving the bi-directional mapping back to human interpretation at multiple levels of abstraction. An international patent application on this method published in 2015 and is expected to proceed into the National Phase in 2016. Critical to implementing this system has been the adoption of a SPARQL Inferencing Notation (SPIN) reasoner coupled with a triple store rule-based reasoner. This approach resolves ambiguity attributed to the semantic equivalence and imprecision of phenotypic terms arising in literature and in databases. In order to better facilitate access to knowledge extracted from the literature and encoded in the ontology, we are implementing a special-purpose web portal to accommodate query and retrieval of biological resources by term or concept, with a multi-tier query platform conforming to current search standards and backed by Semantic Web and Linked Data query standards. In addition to linking to the primary literature, related ontologies and source data, we are also incorporating public data from NCBI, USDA and the Joint Genome Institute in order to provide researchers with immediate access to the appropriate resources for a set of strains, along with consistent, accurate interpretations of available knowledge about those strains that are usable for predictive modeling and in other research and commercial applications. As part of a participation in a broader ontology ecosystem, we are leveraging existing ontologies, including CHEBI, to provide mapping between representations of concepts in other knowledge resources.

As part of our commercialization activities, we continue to develop several software components resulting from this project into a commercial semantic search and document analysis platform with end products being used in Standards in Genomic Sciences and the International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology.

Publications

1. Parker, CT, Garrity, GM and Krdzavac, NB. Systems and Methods for Establishing Semantic Equivalence Between Concepts. U.S. Patent Application No. PCT/US2014/056808. Filed September 22, 2014. Washington, DC: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. WIPO Application WO/2015/042536 A1. Published March 26, 2015.
2. Parker, CT, Garrity, GM, Ussery, D, Wanchai, V and Nookaew, I. Method for Identification and Characterization of Prokaryotes Using Whole Genome DNA Sequence Data. US Provisional Patent Application No. 62/232,925. Filed September 25, 2015. Washington, DC: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.
3. Parker CT, Tindall BJ, Garrity GM. International Code of Nomenclature of Prokaryotes. *Int J Syst Evol Microbiol*. 2015. doi:10.1099/ijsem.0.000778 PMID:26596770