

Challenging 50 years of established views on Ugi reaction: a theoretical approach

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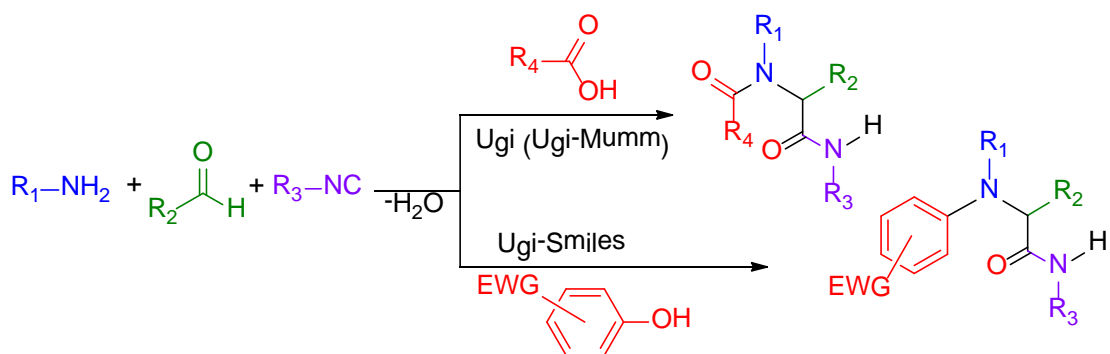
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ABSTRACT: The Ugi reaction is one of the most famous multicomponent couplings and its efficiency is still explained by the original mechanism suggested by Ugi in the 60's. This article aims to present a thorough theoretical study of this reaction. It describes how the imine is activated, how the new stereogenic center is formed and rejects some of the commonly accepted features such as the reversibility of intermediate steps.

KEYWORDS: density functional calculations; multicomponent reaction; mechanism; Ugi reaction.

Introduction

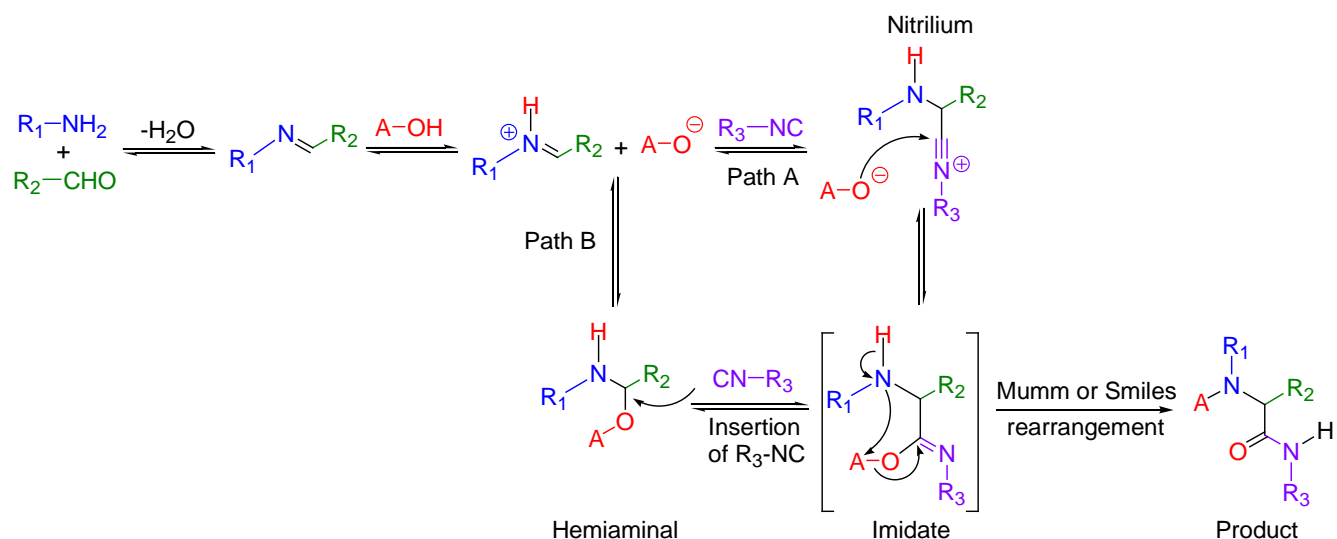
Multicomponent reactions (MCR) are processes in which three or more reactants are coupled at the same time to form one product including most of the atoms of the starting materials.¹ The development of combinatorial chemistry in the late 1980's revealed their tremendous potential and led to a renewal of the field.² In this context, isocyanide-based multicomponent reactions play a prominent role due to the efficiency of the Ugi coupling (see Scheme 1).^{1,3} This reaction consists in the condensation of an amine, an aldehyde, an isocyanide and a carboxylic acid to form peptidic derivatives. It has been used extensively to form various heterocyclic libraries and its scope was further extended by using carboxylic acid surrogates such as HN₃ or phenols.^{4,5}



Scheme 1. The Ugi reaction and its Smiles variant.

Since its discovery in 1959, all synthetic developments around this reaction relied on mechanistic assumptions made by Ugi himself 50 years ago: a series of equilibria involving a nitrilium which is trapped by the oxygenated anion to give the corresponding imidate^{6,7} as depicted in Scheme 2-Path A. Such an ionic mechanism was postulated due to the greater efficiency of this MCR in polar protic solvents (such as methanol). More recently, an alternative mechanism was considered for the imidate formation involving the insertion of the isocyanide in a hemiaminal (see Scheme 2-Path B).^{8,9} In both cases, the last step is supposed to be an irreversible rearrangement displacing all the equilibria by forming a CO double bond: a Mumm rearrangement¹⁰ with carboxylic acids and a Smiles reaction¹¹ with phenols. Surprisingly, the Ugi-Smiles coupling was found to be efficient both in methanol and in aprotic media such as toluene. Another peculiarity of this four-component coupling is that the imidate

intermediate could be isolated in some cases.⁷



Scheme 2. Possible mechanisms for Ugi-type reaction. A-OH can be a carboxylic acid or an electron-poor phenol.

We wish to present herein the first theoretical approach of Ugi-type reactions to answer several questions: What is the privileged mechanistic pathway? And do both Ugi couplings (Ugi and Ugi-Smiles) follow the same path? Why is the Ugi-Smiles imidate sometimes isolated? Most of the steps proposed by Ugi will be confirmed, although tempering the nature of the driving force of the reaction.

Recently, a theoretical study of the Passerini reaction¹² (a three component coupling between aldehydes, isocyanides and carboxylic acids) was published by Maeda *et al.*¹³ However, while the Passerini reaction performs only in apolar solvent, the Ugi one displays a different behavior being much more efficient in protic solvents. The added amine responsible of these effects obviously leads to further complications for the theoretical approach as multiple paths must be envisioned. In the present manuscript, we study both Ugi-Mumm and Ugi-Smiles reactions with a realistic model –using methyl groups for R₁, R₂ and R₃– in methanol and toluene. It can be demonstrated that the two previous mechanistic hypotheses constitute the only plausible pathways (see Supporting Information for the demonstration). The energy profiles are calculated at the M06-2X/6-31+G(d,p) level of theory including

ZPE corrections, using an unbiased method (the string theory¹⁴ as implemented in OpenPath¹⁵) to localize transition states (TS). As we are dealing with complex reactants, many relative orientations of the molecules were tried for each step. In the following energy profiles, only the most stable conformation of each structure is given as all orientations are in equilibrium.

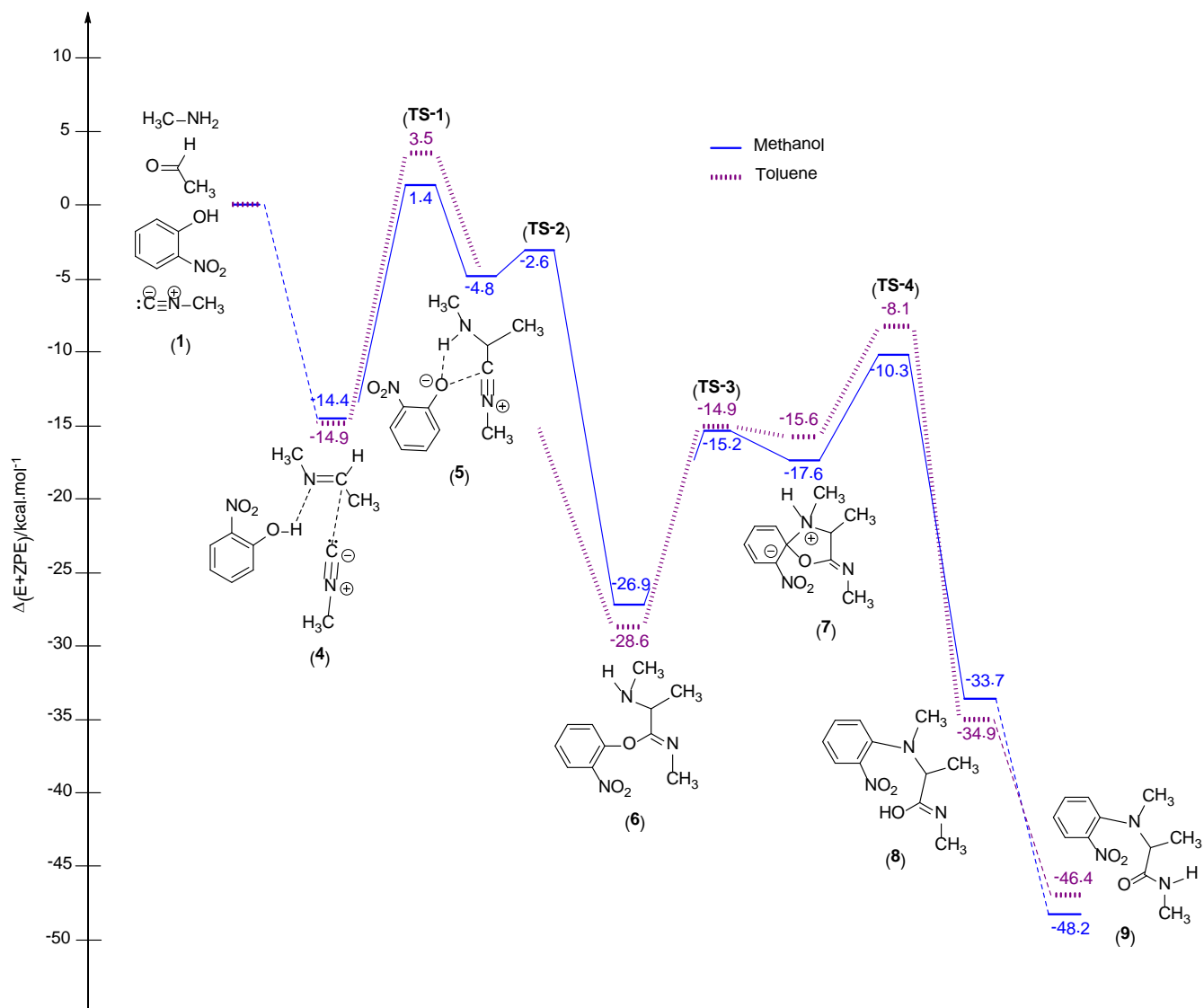
The Ugi-Smiles reaction

Due to our ongoing interest on the Ugi-Smiles reaction,^{5,7(b)} we were eager to address the mechanism of four-component couplings to better understand the differences and similarities experimentally observed between both Ugi-type reactions. Thus, we first investigated the mechanism of the coupling with phenols. The two pathways depicted in Scheme 2 were evaluated with the *ortho*-nitro phenol for A-OH, considering that the formation of an imine, process already described,¹⁶ constitutes fast preliminary steps. Moreover, both Ugi couplings can be experimentally regarded with an imine as starting input.¹⁷

In this study, the energy of the four reactants computed separately is taken as the reference. Optimization of the TS for the insertion of the isocyanide in the hemiaminal (Path B) leads to the TS of the addition of the isocyanide in the iminium (Path A). This is confirmed by performing IRC (intrinsic reaction coordinate) calculations on the former: it links the imidate to the nitrilium, and not the hemiaminal. Thus, the insertion of the isocyanide first involves hemiaminal fragmentation into iminium and phenolate, and subsequent isocyanide addition. Therefore, only one mechanistic path can be considered as valid for the Ugi-Smiles reaction, and all orientations of the reactants led to the same conclusions.

The most plausible energy profiles for the Ugi-Smiles reaction in methanol and in toluene are given in Scheme 3. Cartoons of the optimized structures in methanol are given in Figure 1. In both solvents, the reaction starts with the formation of an imine (**2**), which is then stabilized by hydrogen bonding with the

phenol (**3**). A full energy profile involving (**2**) and (**3**) can be found in Supporting Information. A pre-reactant complex (**4**) involving the isocyanide is then formed. The latter adds to the activated imine to create a new C-C bond, while the phenol proton is transferred to the nitrogen. In methanol, this step requires 15.8 kcal.mol⁻¹ of activation energy and leads to a stable nitrilium-phenolate ion-pair (**5**) that will evolve easily to the imidate (**6**) with a 2.2 kcal.mol⁻¹ barrier. In toluene, the activation energy for the isocyanide addition is 18.4 kcal.mol⁻¹. This addition leads directly to the imidate (**6**) as the nitrilium-phenolate ion pair is not stable in this apolar solvent. Let us note however that in both media the proton transfer between the phenol and the imine occurs prior to the isocyanide addition. Therefore, (TS-1) is best described as the addition of the isocyanide on the iminium hydrogen bonded to the phenolate. (**6**) then undergoes the Smiles rearrangement to form a spiro structure (**7**),^{11,18} with a 11.7 kcal.mol⁻¹ barrier in methanol and 13.7 kcal.mol⁻¹ in toluene. The spiro intermediate (**7**) then opens with a barrier of 7.3 kcal.mol⁻¹ in methanol and 7.5 kcal.mol⁻¹ in toluene. Due to the low barrier for the reverse transformation (**7**→**6**), this is equivalent to a concerted step with an activation energy of 16.6 kcal.mol⁻¹ in methanol and 20.5 kcal.mol⁻¹ in toluene. During the opening of the C-O bond, the proton of the ammonium is transferred, and the imidate (**8**) is formed. A final prototropy (not investigated here) leads to the product (**9**). Thus, two steps are found to be rate-determining for the Ugi-Smiles reaction with comparable activation energies (the isocyanide addition and the Smiles rearrangement), and being strongly exothermic they also drive the reaction. Most noteworthy is the non-reversibility of the formation of the imidate as generally admitted. This result is of first importance, as it is during this step that the new stereogenic center is formed.



Scheme 3. Energy profile of the Ugi-Smiles reaction in methanol and in toluene (at the M06-2X/6-31+G(d,p) level of theory, including ZPE corrections). The energy reference is the sum of the four reactants energies computed separately. For the sake of clarity, the water molecule released in the imine formation is not displayed in the scheme.

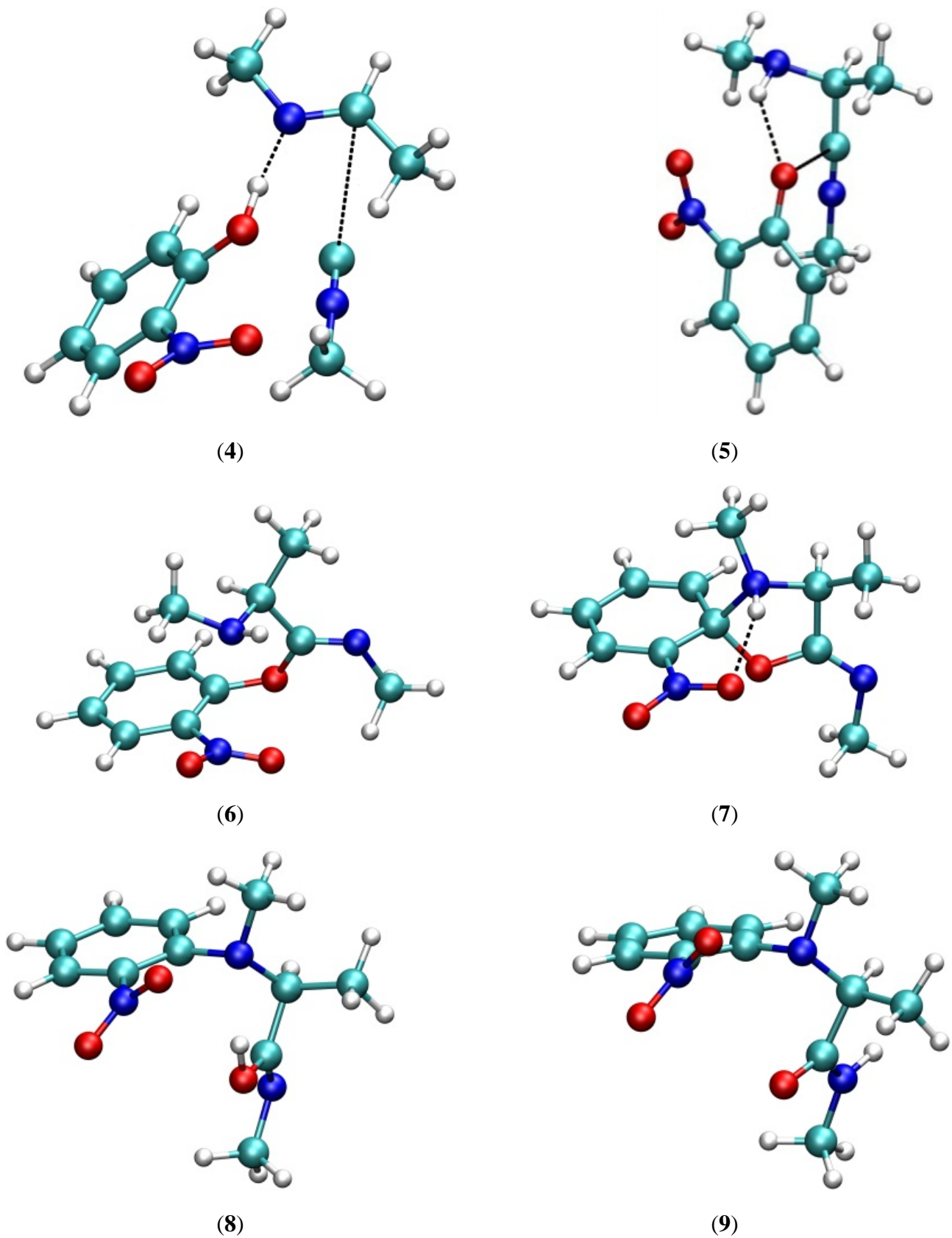


Figure 1. Optimized structures of the reaction intermediate for the Ugi-Smiles reaction in methanol. Structures in toluene are very close. Interactive 3D structures are given in Supporting Information

In the mechanism proposed by Ugi, the imine is activated by a proton transfer. Therefore, mechanisms involving iminium and phenolate were also investigated. First, we computed the relative energy of the proton transfer between the imine and the phenol to give an iminium and a phenolate. As the products are ionic compounds, they were solvated by explicit methanol molecules. The transfer is found to be unfavorable: when the reference is taken as the aldehyde, the amine solvated by one methanol molecule and the phenol solvated by three methanol molecules, the imine-phenol system (solvated by respectively one and three molecules) lies at $-4.0 \text{ kcal.mol}^{-1}$ whereas the iminium-phenolate system lies at $-0.8 \text{ kcal.mol}^{-1}$. We then considered different path for the isocyanide addition on the iminium. If no phenolate is taken into account, the TS for the isocyanide addition on bare iminium lies at $16.4 \text{ kcal.mol}^{-1}$ in methanol and at $51.9 \text{ kcal.mol}^{-1}$ in toluene (to be compared with respectively 1.4 and $3.5 \text{ kcal.mol}^{-1}$). Both activation energies are much too high for these paths to be considered.¹⁹ The imine is thus not activated by proton transfer, but by hydrogen bonds; this is consistent with recent results reported by Fleischmann *et al.* while studying ion pairing by NMR spectroscopy.²⁰ Such a neutral activation process is logical in toluene, but is also the main pathway in polar and protic solvents such as methanol. The main difference between the two solvents lies in the nature of the ion-pair between the nitrilium and the phenolate in the energy profile, as it is an intermediate only in methanol. The mechanism for the imidate formation is thus non-ionic in toluene.

The Ugi-Mumm reaction

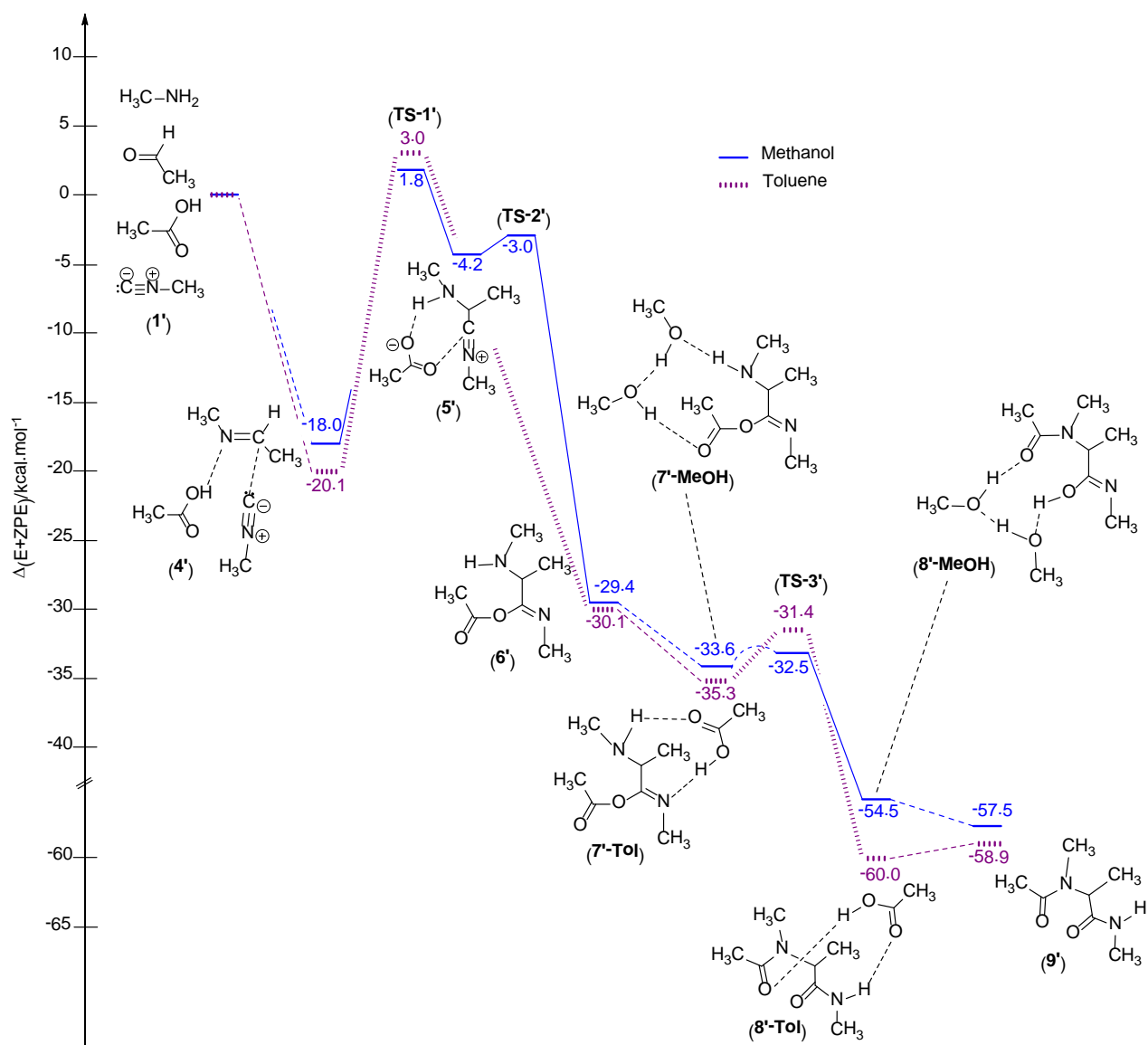
These results prompted us to investigate the classical Ugi reaction, in which acetic acid was chosen to model A-OH. As this reaction is very similar to the Ugi-Smiles one, similar structure will be denoted by adding a prime (') to their name. Here again, for the formation of the imidate (**6'**), only one mechanistic path emerges from calculations as Path B was proved to also proceed through a first fragmentation of the hemiaminal, and then the isocyanide addition. In toluene, IRC calculations for some reactants orientations validate the Path B (isocyanide insertion in the hemiaminal); however they are associated to

barriers over 30 kcal.mol⁻¹ which ensures the low probability of such paths.

The most plausible energy profiles for the Ugi reaction in methanol and in toluene are shown in Scheme 4 and some associated cartoons are depicted in Figure 2. Until (**6'**), the paths are similar to the Ugi-Smiles ones in both solvents. The activation energy for the isocyanide addition was calculated to be 19.8 kcal.mol⁻¹ in methanol and 23.1 kcal.mol⁻¹ in toluene, and no nitrilium-carboxylate ion pair (**5'**) is observed in toluene. Similarly to the Ugi-Smiles case, the same discussion can be done for the imine/iminium difference, and the addition on the bare iminium is unlikely. Therefore, contrary to Ugi's proposal, the mechanism does not involve an intermediate iminium in both media, and is found to be non-ionic in toluene.

Maeda *et al.* demonstrated that for the Passerini reaction (which occurs only in apolar solvents), an extra carboxylic acid molecule is required –as a fourth partner– to allow the Mumm rearrangement to proceed.¹³ A similar procedure was used in toluene, and we found that the Mumm rearrangement proceeds with a low barrier of 3.9 kcal.mol⁻¹ (see Scheme 4 and Figure 3). In protic polar solvent such as methanol, the proton transfer might also be mediated by the solvent itself; we thus have calculated the two energy profiles: both paths proceed with a low activation. With acetic acid, the solvated imidate lies at -31.9 kcal.mol⁻¹ and evolves with a barrier of 1.0 kcal.mol⁻¹. Solvation by a methanol dimer is more favorable: the imidate lies at -33.6 kcal.mol⁻¹ and the highest TS for the Mumm rearrangement is at -32.5 kcal.mol⁻¹. The complete evolution from (**7'-MeOH**) to (**8'-MeOH**) is described in the profile presented in Scheme 5 and associated cartoons are shown in Figure 4. Longer bridges (with more than two methanol molecules) are not as favorable because they are too flexible while with one molecule the bridge is too constrained. We also investigated other possible connections between nitrogen and oxygen atoms, but the one depicted in Scheme 5 is the most favorable one. In the Passerini reaction, the Mumm rearrangement performs between two oxygen atoms; at first order, this process is athermic (Maeda *et al.*

found an exothermic reaction of 1.4 kcal.mol⁻¹ with a 38.3 kcal.mol⁻¹ barrier). In the Ugi reaction, the rearrangement occurs between an oxygen and a nitrogen atoms and leads to the formation of an amide resulting in a highly exothermic process (by ca. 30 kcal.mol⁻¹) and thus a lower activation energy.



Scheme 4. Energy profile of the Ugi reaction in methanol and in toluene (at the M06-2X/6-31+G(d,p) level of theory, including ZPE corrections). The energy reference is the sum of the four reactants energies computed separately. For the sake of clarity, the water molecule released in the imine formation is not displayed in the scheme. When an extra carboxylic acid is involved, its energy reference is the one computed separately. When two methanol molecules are involved, their energy reference is a hydrogen bonded methanol dimer computed separately.

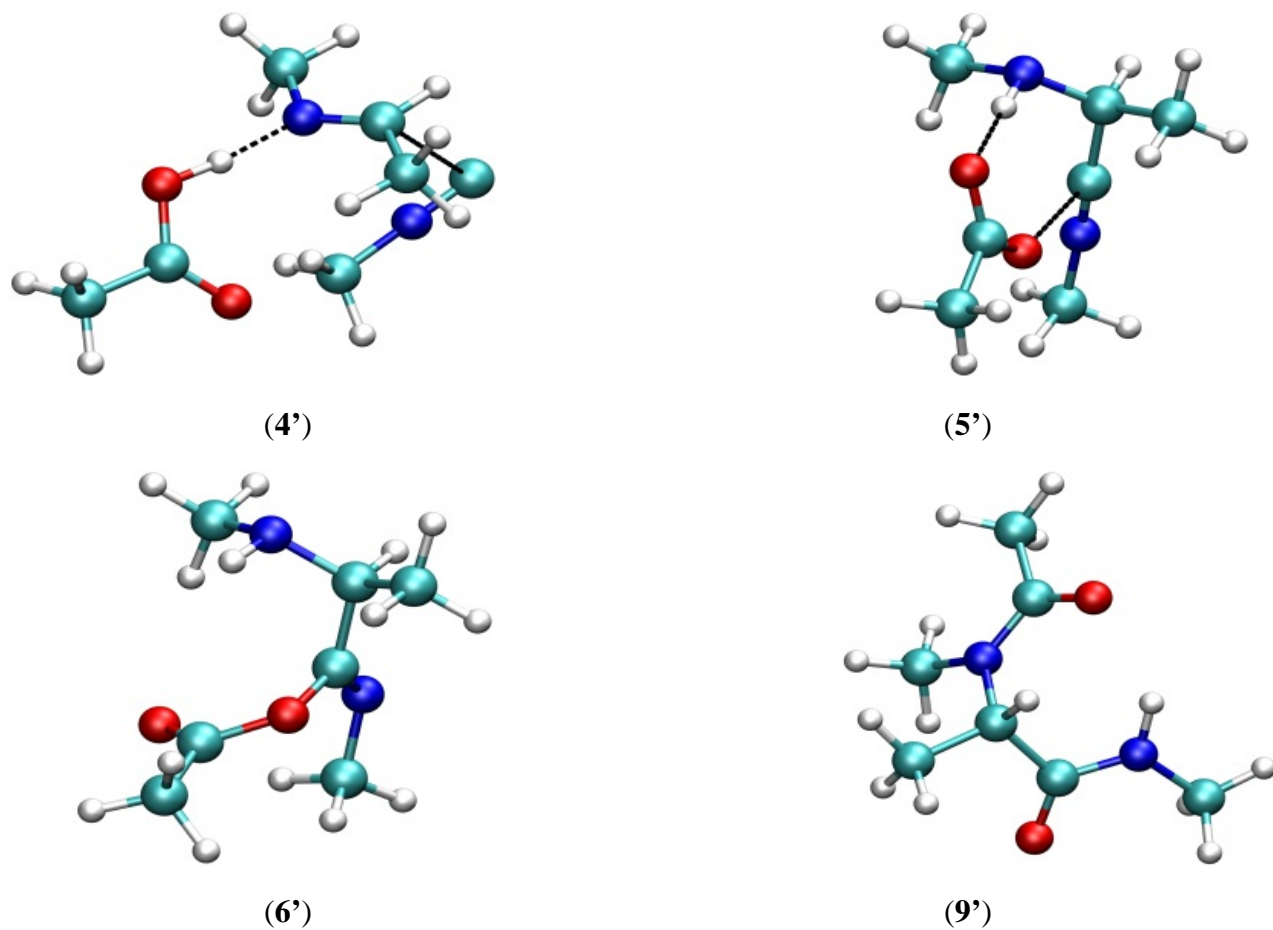


Figure 2. Optimized structures of the reaction intermediate without microsolvation for the Ugi reaction in methanol. Structures in toluene are very close. Interactive 3D structures are given in Supporting Information.

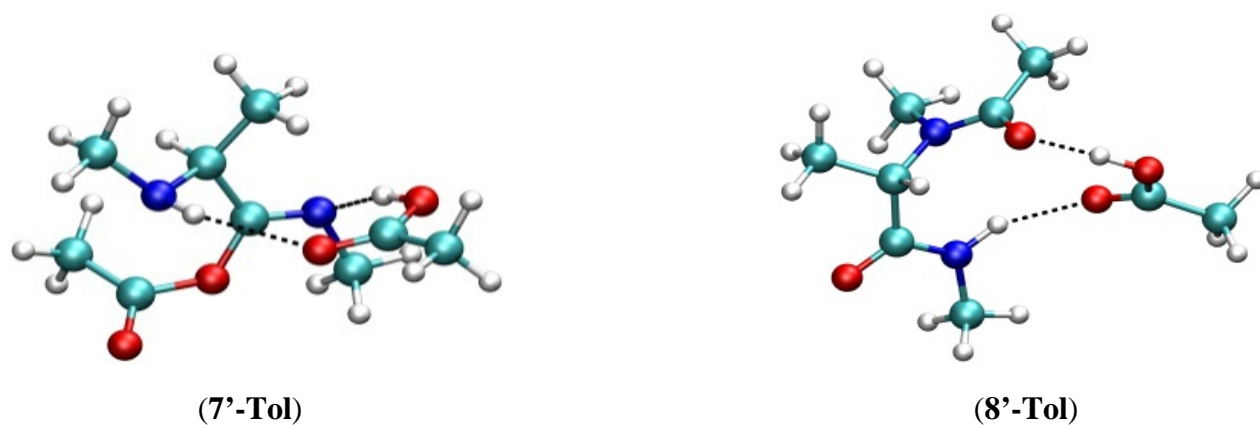
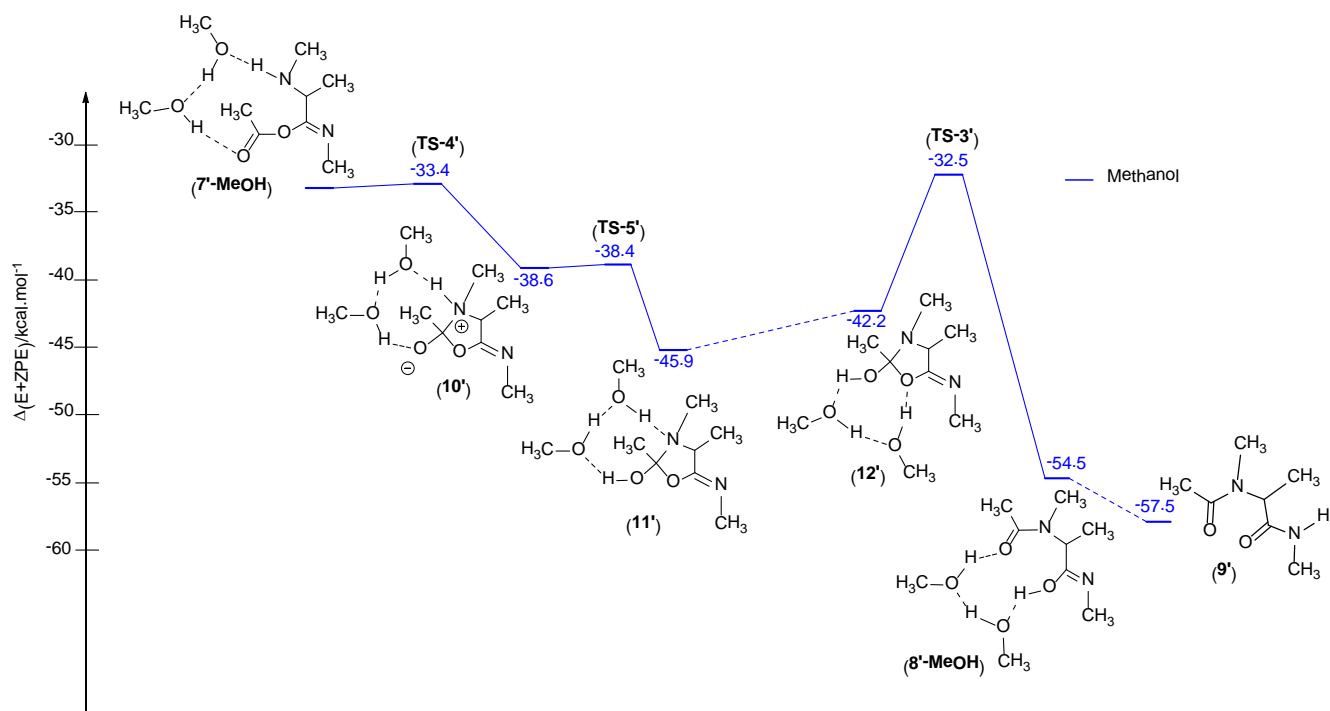
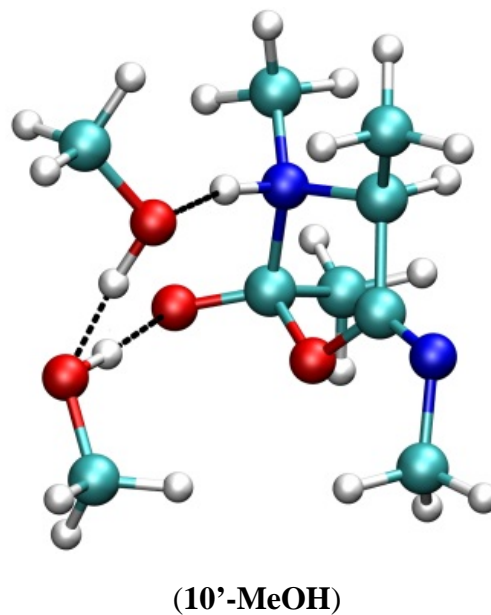
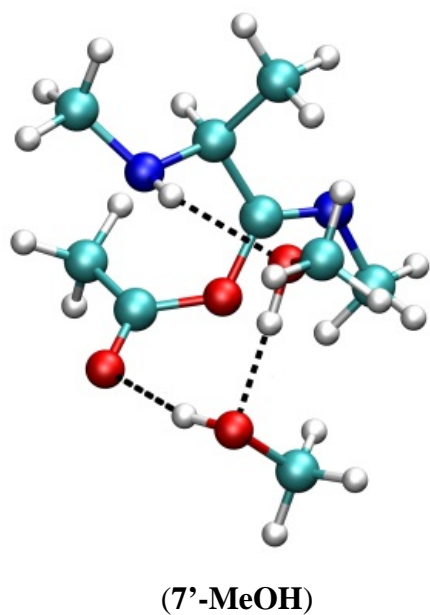


Figure 3. Optimized structures of the Mumm rearrangement with the imidate solvated by acetic acid in toluene. Structures in methanol are very close. Interactive 3D structures are given in Supporting Information.



Scheme 5. Energy profile of the Mumm rearrangement in methanol with explicit solvation by two solvent molecules (at the M06-2X/6-31+G(d,p) level of theory, including ZPE corrections). The energy reference is the sum of the four reactants and a hydrogen bonded methanol dimer energies computed separately.



of equilibriums displaced by a final irreversible step as previously stated.

In the Ugi reactions, going from four reactants to two can have a dramatic effect on the entropy. The Gibbs free energy profiles are shown in Supporting Information. The beginning of the free energy profile is above the reactants, but this is not problematic as the reaction is more exothermic than the highest barrier.²¹ It can be noted that from (4) to (9), the Gibbs free energy profile is almost the same as the (E+ZPE) one shifted by 27 kcal.mol⁻¹, as after (4) only intramolecular reactions occur (see Supporting Information).

Conclusion

To conclude, this mechanistic study has shown that both Ugi and Ugi-Smiles reaction follow the same pathway. In particular, the activation process of the imine was clarified and consists of a hydrogen-bonded complex with the acidic substrate. The rate-determining steps were identified as well as the driving force of the process: this study demonstrates that the nitrilium formation does not proceed through an equilibrium. However, while the Mumm rearrangement is barely activated, the Smiles rearrangement is a rate determining step. These different behaviors explain the isolation of some imidates in the Ugi-Smiles coupling. In both processes, two steps are strongly exothermic so that the efficiency of Ugi-type reactions is not only linked to the final step. Moreover, the non-reversibility of the nitrilium formation also indicates that it should be possible to control the stereochemical outcome of the process. It will thus probably give new opportunities to settle the first enantioselective four-component coupling.

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Supporting Information Available

Computational details. Demonstration that only two mechanisms are possible for the Ugi reactions. Full energy profiles and Gibbs free energy profiles. Comparison of energy profiles between E+ZPE and G energies while considering (4) as the reference. Interactive 3D structures. Cartesian coordinates for the structures discussed in the text.

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