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Helicenes grafted with 1,1,4,4-tetracyanobutadiene moieties: \(\pi\)-helical push-pull systems with strong electronic circular dichroism and two-photon absorption


Dedication (optional))

Abstract: Enantiopure \(P\) and \(M\)-carbo[6]helicenes substituted with one or two tetracyanobutadienes in positions 2 and 15 have been prepared. Grafting of these accepting groups on the \(\pi\)-helical core resulted in strong charge transfer effects which highly affected UV-visible, electronic circular dichroism and two-photon absorption responses. The ECD signal was found to be reversibly switched by applying a redox stimulus.

Introduction

Designing chiral molecular materials with strong chiroptical properties has attracted considerable attention in the last decades due to their specific interaction with polarized light.[1,2] Indeed, the possibility to tune optical rotation (OR), electronic circular dichroism (ECD), and circularly polarized luminescence (CPL) is especially appealing since it may find applications in different fields of science such as information transport and storage, optical displays, logic gates, and biology.[3] In this regard, \(\pi\)-helicene derivatives have appeared as ideal molecular candidates because of their peculiar chiral \(\pi\)-conjugated helical structure which provides them with high racemization barrier (especially for \(n \geq 6\)), large-magnitude OR, and intense ECD and CPL signatures.[4] Their recent implementation in circularly polarized light emitting diodes (CP-OLEDs),[5] organic transistors,[6] and organic photovoltaic cells[7] have opened new perspectives for chirality and chiroptical materials in materials science. Aside from linear chiroptics, helicenes have recently shown to exhibit two-photon circular dichroism (TPCD).[8] Finally, chiroptical switching of helicenes using light, acid/base, or redox stimuli represents another attractive area for developing potential molecular memory elements or logic operators for data storage.[9]

1,1,4,4-Tetracyanobutadienes (TCBDs) are known to be strongly accepting groups that may give rise to donor-acceptor (push-pull) molecular structures when conjugated to donor fragments, and provide remarkably strong one-photon absorption in the visible and red region, along with nonlinear optical responses.[10a,b] TCBDs possess electron-accepting properties that are able to significantly tune absorption features of molecules and, more generally, have a strong impact on the physical characteristics of the moieties they are linked to.[10]

Their synthesis implies a sequence of [2+2] cycloaddition-retroelectrocyclization (CA-RE) between tetracyanoethylene (TCNE) and electron-rich alkynes activated by donating groups.[11] The identity of these donors is various and the yield of the reaction strongly depends on their nature. Some years ago, some of us reported the synthesis of TCBDs from ynamides, which played the role of electron-rich alkynes.[12a,b] Their reduction potentials were among the lowest out of reported so far TCBDs, allowing us to envisage promising applications by tuning properties of extended \(\pi\)-systems. Accordingly, we wanted to investigate the influence of TCBDs coming from ynamides on the physical and (chiro)optoelectronic properties of helicenes.

Herein, we thus report on the synthesis of multifunctional chiral molecules resulting from the conjugation between a helicenic core and one or two electron-withdrawing TCBD units (Figure 1). Thanks to the synergic effect between the \(\pi\)-helix and the TCBD units, these enantioptopure molecules displayed linear absorption and ECD in the visible region together with nonlinear two-photon absorption (TPA) response. Their UV-vis, ECD, and TPA spectral features were rationalized by quantum-chemical calculations. The potential use of these systems as redox-triggered chiroptical switches was also examined.

Supporting information for this article is given via a link at the end of the document.([Please delete this text if not appropriate])

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Figure 1. Chemical structures of carbo[4] and carbo[6]helicene-TCBD derivatives 1a and P-1b,c. Ts = tosyl.
Results and Discussion

Synthesis of mono- and bis-substituted helicene-TCBD derivatives 1a-c

We first decided to evaluate the possibility to synthesize an ynamide conjugated with a polycyclic aromatic structure, namely a benzophenanthrene, and to make it react with TCNE to obtain derivative 1a (Figure 1). To do so (Scheme 1, top), compound 2a was prepared according to a described procedure (33) and reacted with N-bromosuccinimide (NBS) in the presence of a catalytic amount of silver nitrate to give carb[o4]helicene- ethynylbromide 3a with 77% yield. Then, 3a was subjected to Hsung conditions (34) to form ynamide 4a with modest 26% yield (unoptimized due to the very low solubility of 3a). Reacting 3a with TCNE via a [2+2] cycloaddition followed by a retro-electrocyclization (35) (CA-RE sequence) finally afforded the target carb[o4]helicene-TCBD derivative 1a with 99% yield. The compound was fully characterized; its 1H NMR displayed the typical signals for both the [4]helicenic core (see Supplementary Information, SI) with for instance the two typical down)field ppm corresponding to Hs 2.34 and 2.57 ppm, a typical up)field shielded ddd signal at 6.82 ppm, and mass spectrometry (see SI). For instance, while the overall yields (Scheme 1, middle and bottom). These compounds were also fully characterized by NMR spectroscopy and mass spectrometry (see SI). For instance, while the 1H NMR of C-symmetric 1b displayed the characteristic methyl groups at 2.34 and 2.57 ppm, a typical up-field shielded ddd signal at 6.82 ppm corresponding to Hs 2.34 and 2.57 ppm, a typical up-field shielded ddd signal at 6.82 ppm, respectively; its 13C NMR spectrum showed the characteristic peaks of the four cyano groups resonating between 110 and 113 ppm, indicating the unambiguous presence of the TCBD moiety. The successful synthesis of 1a encouraged us to prepare longer and configurationally stable carb[o6]helicene-TCBD derivatives. The same synthetic approach, i.e. i) bromination of the triple bond, ii) Hsung coupling, (34) and iii) CA-RE sequence, was therefore applied to mono-2-trimethylsilyl-ethyl- (rac- P, or M-2b) (36) and bis-2,15-trimethylsilylethylcarb[o6]helicene (rac-, P, or M-2c) (36) to obtain respectively compounds 1b and 1c in either racemic, or enantiopure P and M forms, with good overall yields (Scheme 1, middle and bottom). These compounds were also characterized by NMR spectroscopy and mass spectrometry (see SI). For instance, while the 1H NMR of C-symmetric 1b displayed the characteristic methyl groups at 2.34 and 2.57 ppm, a typical up-field shielded ddd signal at 6.82 ppm corresponding to Hs 2.34 and 2.57 ppm, respectively; its 13C NMR spectrum showed the characteristic peaks of the four cyano groups resonating between 110 and 113 ppm, indicating the unambiguous presence of the TCBD moiety. Since crystals of rac-1b, P-1b and of rac-1c could be grown by slow diffusion of pentane vapors onto dichloromethane solutions, the structures of 1b and 1c could also be ascertained by X-ray crystallography (see Figure 2 for rac-1b,c and SI). The rac-1b, P-1b and rac-1c compounds crystallized in the P-1, P6_22 and C2/c space groups and displayed helicity (dihedral angle between the terminal helicenic rings) of 57.9, 59.7 and 61.2°, respectively, that are within the range of classical strong distortions. (37) However, in each derivative, one of the two dicyanovinyl fragments form a dihedral angle of 62.8, 89.2 and 57.5° for rac-1b, P-1b and rac-1c, respectively, thus showing classical strong distortions. (37) However, in each derivative, one of the two dicyanovinyl branch is nearly coplanar with the helicene terminal ring (dihedral angle lower than 17°) therefore ensuring efficient conjugation with the π-helical core (see Figures 2a,b). On the contrary, the tosyl groups are all placed out of the terminal helicenic planes and are involved in the supramolecular organization through π-π interactions. Indeed, in Figures 2c and 2d,e are depicted the homochiral and heterochiral assemblies of P-1b and rac-1c, respectively. P-1b displays a dimeric homochiral arrangement with intermolecular π-π interactions between the P enantiomers and intramolecular π-π stacking between the phenyl of the tosyl group and the closer terminal helicenic ring (centroid-centroid distance of 3.64 Å, Figure 2c). Rac-1c organizes into repeated supramolecular motifs with intermolecular π-π interactions occurring between i) the helicenic cores and ii) TCBD tosyl units of P and M enantiomers (Figures 2d,e).

UV-vis spectroscopy

UV-vis one-photon absorption spectra of 1a-c were recorded in dichloromethane solutions and are displayed in Figure 3 along with the absorption spectrum of bis-trimethylsilyl-ethyl-helicene precursor 2c (38). The functionalization of the carb[o4] or carb[o6]helicene core by one or two TCBD unit(s) strongly modifies its absorption spectrum with the appearance of new broad and intense visible bands between 390 and 550 nm. These additional bands can be attributed to a strong intramolecular charge transfer (ICT) from the π-electron system of the helicenic donor fragment to the TCBD group(s), as previously observed for other TCBD-based derivatives, (10-12) and as demonstrated here by TDDFT calculations and electrochemistry. (39) Indeed, the simulated (BLYP with the continuum solvent model for dichloromethane) UV-vis spectra agree well with the experiment and confirm helicene-to-TCBD ICT character of the additional absorption at 460 nm in 1b,c (Figures 4 and 5, Table 1, SI). Namely, the lowest-energy excitation with sizeable oscillator strength in 1b, #2 calculated at 482 nm, corresponds to transitions from the two highest occupied (HO) molecular orbitals (MOs) to the lowest unoccupied (LU) MO, with the occupied orbitals localized on the π-helicen core and LUMO spread out mainly over the π-electron system of the TCBD group (with almost no contribution of the N-tosyl unit). For 1c, the lowest-energy UV-vis band originates predominantly from three excitations close in energy, #1 calculated at 460 nm, #2 at 456 nm, and #4 at 431 nm, which
involve contributions from nearly degenerate helicene-centered HOMO-1, HOMO and TCBD-centered LUMO, LUMO+1. Note that HOMO-1 and HOMO of 1c represent two distinct \(\pi\)-orbitals of the helicene electron system, while LUMO and LUMO+1 represent in-phase and out-of-phase linear combinations of the lowest unoccupied TCBD frontier molecular fragment orbitals (FMOs, *vide infra*). Furthermore, the small energetic splitting between LUMO and LUMO+1 indicates that the TCBD-centered LUMO \(\pi\)-orbitals of 1c weakly interact with each other through the helicene.

As shown in Figure 3, a visible red-shift of the lowest-energy intensity, from 420 to 480 nm, but without change in the molar extinction coefficients \((\varepsilon \sim 5 \times 10^3 \text{M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1})\) is observed for 1b as compared to 1a, which can be explained by an extension of the conjugated \(\pi\)-electron system for 1b. On the contrary, the corresponding band in 1c appears to be blue-shifted (by ca. \(-50\) nm) and strongly enhanced in intensity (molar extinction coefficient increased by a factor of two at 420 nm) relative to 1b. Both these features are well reproduced by the calculations.

Inspection of the orbital energies (see Figure 5) reveals noticeable energetic stabilization of the high-lying occupied orbitals and almost no effect on the lowest unoccupied TCBD-centered MOs upon introduction of two TCBD units onto helicene core comparing to the mono-substituted system. This results in an increase in HOMO-1,HOMO–LUMO,LUMO+1 gap(s) for 1c that may rationalize the observed blue-shift of its low-energy ICT band. The corresponding increase in the intensity of this band can be attributed to the overlapping of dual ICT absorption from the helicene to the two TCBD units (*vide supra*) and exciton coupling interactions between those ICT states (*vide infra*).

**ECD spectroscopy**

The effect of the strong charge transfers in helicene-TCBD systems 1b,c is particularly striking in their ECD spectra (see Figure 3). Indeed, while the precursor \(P-2c\) displays a negative ECD band at 280 nm \((\Delta\varepsilon = -224 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1})\) and a positive one at 341 nm \((\Delta\varepsilon = +320 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1})\) that are typical for helicene derivatives and correspond to the classical \(\pi-\pi^*\) transitions (see Ref. [14a]), \(P-1b\) and \(P-1c\) show two negative bands at 243 nm \((\Delta\varepsilon = -188 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1})\) for \(1b,c\) and 300 nm \((1b: \Delta\varepsilon = -34 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1}, 1c: \Delta\varepsilon = -97 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1})\) and one positive ECD band between 340-346 nm \((\Delta\varepsilon = +125 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1})\) for \(1b,c\). In line with the UV-vis absorption, \(P-1b,c\) demonstrate also additional ECD bands between 390-550 nm, much more intense and with a bisaniline signature \((\Delta\varepsilon = -10 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1} \text{ at } 397 \text{ nm} + \text{ +55 M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1} \text{ at } 480 \text{ nm})\) in the bis-substituted \(P-1c\) system as compared to the mono-substituted \(P-1b\) derivative \((\Delta\varepsilon = +14 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{cm}^{-1} \text{ at } 480 \text{ nm})\) (see inset of Figure 3).
Figure 2. X-ray crystallographic structures of racemic compounds heterochiral arrangement rac1c (supramolecular, d,e).

Figure 3. Left: UV-vis spectra of bis-trimethylsilyl-ethynyl-helicene precursor 2c (black), and helicene-TCBD derivatives 1a (orange), 1b (blue), and 1c (red) (dichloromethane, 298 K, C 10⁻⁵ M). Right: Mirror-image ECD spectra of enantiopure P- and M-1b,c compared to P- and M-2c.

Figure 4. Comparison of the simulated UV-vis (left) and ECD (right) spectra of helicene-TCBD derivatives P-1b,c with bis-trimethylsilyl-ethynyl-helicene system P-2c used as a reference. No spectral shift has been applied. Calculated excitation energies and rotatory strengths indicated as ‘stick’ spectra. Numbered excitations correspond to those analyzed in detail. For the assignment of the calculated spectra of 2c see Ref. [14a]. See also SI.
Figure 5. Isosurfaces (±0.04 au) of MOs involved in selected transitions of 1b (top) and 1c (bottom). H = HOMO, L = LUMO. Values listed in the parentheses are the corresponding orbital energies, in eV. See also SI.

Table 1. Selected dominant excitations and occupied (occ) – unoccupied (unocc) MO pair contributions (greater than 10%) of the P-1b and P-1c. See also SI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excitation</th>
<th>$E$ / eV</th>
<th>$\lambda$ / nm</th>
<th>$f$</th>
<th>$R$ / $10^{-6}$ cgs</th>
<th>occ no.</th>
<th>unocc no.</th>
<th>%</th>
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<td>P-1b</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>#2</td>
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<td>482</td>
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<td>80.77</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>173</td>
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<tr>
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<td>#1</td>
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<td>257</td>
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<td>43.7</td>
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The ECD envelopes for helicene-TCBD derivatives $P$-$1b,c$ and the reference system $P$-$2c$ calculated with linear response TDDFT (BHLYP functional) reproduce, in general, very well the experimentally observed ECD features (Figure 4). The analysis of molecular orbital pair-contributions to selected dominant excitations for $P$-$1b,c$ (Figures 4 and 5, Table 1, SI) shows that the main positive intense band of these systems observed experimentally around 340 nm originates mainly, as expected, from helicene-centered $\pi\rightarrow\pi^*$ excitations (see excitation #8 calculated at 321 nm for $P$-$1b$ and excitation #13 calculated at 323 nm for $P$-$1c$). However, the unoccupied MOs involved in those excitations spread out also over the TCBD $\pi$-systems (see for example LUMO+1 for $1b$ and LUMO+2 for $1c$ in Figure 5), and therefore these excitations afford a partial helicene-to-TCBD charge-transfer character.

In line with the experiment, additional low-energy ECD bands attributed to strong ICTs from the $\pi$-electron system of the helicene core to the TCBD group(s) are also visible in the simulated spectra of $P$-$1b,c$. In the case of $P$-$1b$ the aforementioned excitation #2 (calculated at 482 nm) and excitation #4 (391 nm) reveal opposite-sign rotatory strengths (R) and consequently lead to the appearance of a bisignate pair of bands in the low-energy part of the simulated ECD spectrum. The rotatory strength of excitation #4 appears to be overestimated in the calculations as the corresponding experimental ECD of $P$-$1b$ does not become negative in this energy region. An analogous but much more intense bisignate ECD is computed for $P$-$1c$ due to four intense excitations: #1 at 460 nm has positive R while excitations #2 (456 nm), #4 (431 nm), and #5 (367 nm) have negative R. The strong intensity of excitation #5, which is evidently not suppressed sufficiently by the positive ECD intensity of higher-energy excitations, may be responsible for the overestimation of the negative band around 400 nm for $P$-$1c$ when comparing with the experiment. Note that the intensity of the negative band for both $P$-$1b$ and $P$-$1c$ seems to be very sensitive to the solvent effects (see SI).

Of particular interest is the possibility of exciton coupling (EC) ECD for the bis-substituted helicene-TCBD $1c$. We discuss this system in relation to a carbo[6]helicene functionalized with two diketopyrrolopyrrole (DPP) groups, for which we recently clearly demonstrated EC ECD and corresponding CPL in the low-energy (long-wavelength) region\cite{14}. The TCBD-N(Me)(Ts) substituent differs in crucial ways from DPP in that its frontier molecular FOs are much lower in energy overall, namely 2.3 and 0.9 eV lower than for DPPBr for the HOFO and LUFO, respectively, and there is also a 1.4 eV larger energy gap of the HOFOs of TCBD, while the participating unoccupied MOs are the aforementioned LUMO and LUMO+1 corresponding to linear combinations of the TCBD LUFOs. The energies of the excitations and the participating MOs are consistent with an exciton coupling of the HOFO-LUFO transitions of the substituents. However, the presence of the couplet is hardly visible in the broadened ECD spectrum. The couplet is overpowered by the pair of excitations no. 5 and 13 at lower and higher energy, respectively, which have the same $-/+$ sign pattern of their rotatory strengths as the exciton couplant.

Second, the low energy of the lowest unoccupied FO renders TCBD an ideal acceptor group in ICT excitations. This is clearly seen in the assignment of the long-wavelength excitations of both $1b$ (#2 and #4) and $1c$ (#1, #2, #4, and #5) in which the participating orbitals are the three highest occupied helicene $\pi$-orbitals (HOMO-2 to HOMO) and the TCBD-centered LUMO (for $1b$) or LUMO, LUMO+1 (for $1c$). Due to the ICT character, these excitations have sizable and similar dipole strengths for both $1b$ and $1c$. However, for $1b$ the corresponding rotatory strengths are weak, whereas the ECD intensity of $P$-$1c$ is drastically enhanced in this region of the spectrum.

It therefore appears that the ECD-intense long-wavelength excitations of $1c$ can be conceptualized as an exciton coupling among transitions from helicene $\pi$-orbitals to the lowest unoccupied FO of either one of the TCBD substituents. Due to the rigidity and chirality of the helicene, the associated un-coupled electric transition dipoles form a helical arrangement, similar to the un-coupled transition dipoles in a traditional EC ECD couplant, resulting in the fairly intense ECD of $1c$ between 550 and 350 nm. We note that the role of charge transfer states in EC models is well recognized.\cite{16} The case of $1c$ is somewhat less typical in that the ICT transitions that couple together originate in the same subsystem, namely the helicene. The physical mechanism causing the long-wavelength ECD intensity is however likely the same as in traditional exciton coupling CD, namely an electrostatic coupling of two or more electric transition dipoles with accompanying magnetic transition dipoles coupled in a helical arrangement.

![Figure 6. Comparison of low-energy region of ECD spectra for $P$-$1b$ and $P$-$1c$ from TDDFT BHLYP calculations and from matrix method dipole coupling model.](image-url)
In order to verify the hypothesis that the origin of the intense long-wavelength ECD of 1c is due to a coupling of individual helicene-to-TCBD electric transition dipole moments (TDMs) resulting in rotatory strengths that are much larger than those of the un-coupled transitions, a 'matrix method' (MM) dipole coupling model\textsuperscript{[17]} as described in Ref.\textsuperscript{[17b]} was set up, with the energies and TDMs for excitations #2 and #4 of mono-substituted helicene-TCBD 1b as input. Further details can be found in the SI. Figure 6 compares the resulting MM spectrum with the TDDFT calculated ones for 1c and 1b. Despite its simplicity, the model is consistent with a positive/negative ECD when going from longer to shorter wavelengths as a result of excitonic electric TDM coupling of individual helicene π to TCBD π* transitions. The long-wavelength ECD of 1c is further enhanced, relative to the dipole coupling model, and blue-shifted, by the electronic coupling between the helicene core and the substituents, similar to what we found recently for the bis-substituted helicene-DPP system.\textsuperscript{[14a]}

It therefore appears that the long-wavelength chiroptical properties of helicenes can be enhanced by functionalization with different types of groups. Strongly absorbing substituents such as DPP then gives rise to helicene-enhanced exciton coupling ECD and luminescence, while strong electron acceptors such as TCBD promote helicene-enhanced ECD due to exciton coupling of charge-transfer excitations originating in the helicene π-system, thus describing a kind of exciton coupling within a helical push-pull system.\textsuperscript{[11a,14]} While, such spectral effects may also have been observed previously, no specific distinctions were made between standard vs. ICT emissive, neither in solution nor in the solid state.

**Electrochemical behavior and chiroptical redox switching**

Several examples of chiroptical switching properties based on redox-active organometallic or heteroatomic helicenic derivatives have been reported in the literature,\textsuperscript{[9]} but only limited examples have shown reversible reductive behavior.\textsuperscript{[18]} The redox properties of the acceptor-substituted helicene-TCBDs 1a-c were studied using cyclic voltammetry (CV) in dichloromethane with nBu4NPF6 (0.1 M) as the supporting electrolyte, vs. saturated calomel electrode (SCE) (see Table 2 and Figure S1.7 in the SI). The mono-substituted systems 1a,b show two reversible, well-resolved 1e- reduction steps centered on the tetracyanobutadiene unit at ca. -0.16 and -0.70 V vs. SCE, while the bis-substituted 1c displays four reversible 1e- reductions, with the third and fourth ones being very close in potential. These data are in agreement with the results obtained for formerly studied TCBD derivatives.\textsuperscript{[11,12]} The fact that 1c exhibits a difference of 230 mV between the first and second reduction processes indicates either a significant electronic interaction between the two mono-reduced TCBD fragments inside the helical environment, which may be explained by a gain of electron density on the helicene core after the first reduction event or the presence of Coulombic repulsion between negatively charged units. These effects become negligible when the TCBD units are doubly reduced (\(\Delta E_{\text{Red}} = 60\) mV between \(E_{\text{Red,1}}\) and \(E_{\text{Red,2}}\), see Table 2 and SI).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>(E_{\text{Red}}) (V)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>-0.15, -0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b</td>
<td>-0.18, -0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c</td>
<td>-0.17, -0.40, -0.72, -0.78*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Determined by differential pulse voltammetry (step potential: 10 mV)

Taking advantage of the reversibility of the redox processes in combination with the strong ECD response of the helicene-TCBD 1c in the visible region, we examined its redox-triggered ECD switching activity. First, we evidenced the UV-vis signatures of the reduced 1c species, i.e. 1c\(^{-}\), 1c\(^{2-}\), and 1c\(^{3-}\), by spectroelectrochemical studies. As depicted in the left panel of Figure 7, 1c\(^{-}\) and 1c\(^{2-}\) exhibit very similar absorption spectra, slightly modified as compared to the neutral system 1c by (1) the appearance of a new band between 550 and 700 nm, (2) a small red-shift and increase in the intensity of 1c\(^{-}\) at 450 nm, and (3) an absorption decrease around 355 nm, resulting in an isobestic point at 390 nm. Since the third and fourth reduction of 1c occur at almost similar potentials, we directly monitored the spectra of 1c\(^{3-}\) which shows, relative to 1c\(^{2-}\), a further increase in the absorption between 550 and 700 nm, a 30 nm red-shift of the band at 470 nm, and an intensity decrease around 385 nm. Isobestic points were observed at 350 and 493 nm (see Figure S1.8), which ascertain the continuous stoichiometry when going from 1c\(^2\) to 1c\(^3\) during the spectroelectrochemical experiment. In addition, the stability of 1c\(^{-}\) and 1c\(^{2-}\) and their reversible interconversion with 1c were evaluated by switching the applied potential (vs. SCE) between 0 and -0.4 V (1c \(\rightarrow\) 1c\(^{2-}\)) and between 0 and -1.0 V (1c\(^{2-}\) \(\rightarrow\) 1c\(^{3-}\)) while recording the resulting UV-vis absorption at one defined wavelength. This switching experiment showed that redox-induced conversion between 1c and 1c\(^{2-}\) was fully reversible (see right panel of Figure 7), while the corresponding process between 1c and 1c\(^{3-}\) appeared to be less reversible due to the instability of the latter under our experimental conditions.

**Table 2. Redox potentials (\(E_{\text{Red}}\)) of 1a, 1b and 1c compounds referenced versus SCE and given in V (scanning rate: 100 mV s\(^{-1}\)).**
The redox-triggered ECD modulation of $P_-$ and $M-1c$ was then investigated. Accordingly, the ECD responses of both enantiomers were recorded while applying increasing potentials ranging from 0 to -0.4 V vs. SCE and gave expected mirror-image ECD changes (see Figure 8). For instance, $P-1c$ displays a significant intensity decrease of the band at 470 nm accompanied by an increase in the signal at 350 nm with a distinct isobestic point at 410 nm. Interestingly, the negative Cotton effect observed at 407 nm for $P-1c$ disappears when going to $P-1c^2$. This is not unexpected as reduction of $1c$ must predominantly occur at the electron-accepting TCBD moieties, thus affecting their $\pi$-electron system and consequently low-energy $\pi\pi^*\pi$ ICT helicene–TCBDs excitations and exciton coupling interactions between them. In addition, no ECD-active band was observed between 550 and 750 nm; contrary to the UV-vis response of $1c^2$. We then evaluated the chiroptical switching activity of $M-1c$ by successively applying potentials of 0.1 and -0.4 V vs. SCE during several cycles while recording its ECD response at 477 nm (Figure 8, insert). It showed a reversible $\Delta\varepsilon$ amplitude change between -30 and -24 M$^{-1}$ cm$^{-1}$ corresponding to $M-1c$ and $M-1c^2$, respectively, which last for more than 5 redox cycles, thus confirming the bistability of this new example of redox-triggered chiroptical switch.

TPA spectroscopy

The Nonlinear Optical (NLO) activity of helicenes has been reported since a long time, especially in the case of second-order NLO effects and Second Harmonic Generation (SHG). More recently, the two-photon absorption of helicenes has also been examined, together with the related two-photon circular dichroism. These studies on organic helicene derivatives have highlighted the effects of charge transfers (either internal to the helical backbone or external to it) and of the $\pi$-conjugation extension. Therefore, it appeared interesting to study the TPA response of our helicene–TCBD derivatives displaying significant charge transfer. The experimental and simulated (CAM-B3LYP in vacuo) TPA spectra and corresponding calculated TPA electronic transitions for $1b$ and $1c$ are presented in Figure 9. Regarding the experimental $\sigma_{TPA}$ cross-section values, they range between 5-40 GM for mono-substituted $1b$, i.e. very similar to former helicene derivatives, namely 2-cyano-carbo[6]helicene,[8] displaying significant intramolecular charge transfer. Bis-substituted helicene $1c$ displays $\sigma_{TPA}$ between 1-6 GM, i.e. much less than for $1b$. This difference can be justified based on previous work done by Brédas and co-workers.[20a] These authors demonstrated that in non-centrosymmetric conjugated molecules, with push-pull motif, a reduction of the permanent dipole moment can result in a reduction of the effective $\sigma_{TPA}$. This is the case in compound $1c$, where the relatively symmetric charge transfer around the central helicene core (Figure 2b) affects, directly, the difference in permanent dipole moments between the ground and excited states. In order to obtain the best theoretical-experimental match, the calculated spectra were -86 nm and -64 nm shifted for $1b$ and $1c$, respectively; this is common practice in theoretical-experimental works.[21-29] First, we note the reasonable theoretical
reproduction of the experimental spectral shape of both 1b and 1c. The experiment shows the most intense measurable band at 690 nm for both molecules. Interestingly, while this peak corresponds to a transition to the first excited state for 1b, it corresponds to the second for 1c. This observation can be explained by comparing the dipolar symmetry of 1b with the quadrupolar symmetry of 1c, and acknowledging the non-planarity of the latter. In this scenario, it is not totally unexpected that TPA transitions in 1c appear at longer wavelengths as a result of the intramolecular charge transfer from the donor to the acceptor along a quadrupolar path.\textsuperscript{[20b-d]} In fact, the calculated spectrum of 1c reveals a shoulder produced by the first excited state transition that was resolvable experimentally and measured around 730 nm. The less intense band predicted by the theory around 640 nm corresponds to the second and fourth excited state transitions for 1b and 1c, respectively. The band was measurable for 1b and detectable for 1c. However, the sharp increase in the experimental TPA below 600 nm, attributed to enhancement due to linear absorption likely explains why the 640 nm peak was not resolved for 1c. A second important observation is that in the case of 1c the predicted cross-sections are larger than the experimental. While difficult to explain this difference considering that all measurements were made in the femtosecond regime where excited state absorption is negligible,\textsuperscript{[26,27]} it is a common observation in theoretical-experimental studies.\textsuperscript{[8,22-24,28-30]} However, in the case of 1b, the experimental cross-sections are almost exactly as predicted. The experimental differences could be attributed to the increased degree of symmetry found in 1c compared to 1b. The difference between the calculated and experimental cross-section of 1c is more difficult to explain, perhaps solvent effects are more important in 1c than in 1b due to the quadrupolar ICT path.\textsuperscript{[20d]} Finally, the experimentally observed strong TPA signal on the blue-side of the spectra is attributed to the enhanced TPA typically observed as the excitation wavelength approaches the linear absorption region.\textsuperscript{[31,32]}

Figure 9. Experimental (black) and simulated TPA spectra along with calculated electronic transitions of 1b (top, red, -66 nm shifted) and 1c (bottom, blue, -64 nm shifted). See Experimental section for the corresponding theoretical and experimental details.

Conclusions

We have shown that grafting electron-withdrawing groups such as tetracyanoacetylene derivatives onto an enantiomerically pure carbo[6]helicene strongly modifies its electronic and (chir)optical properties. The strong charge transfers from the helicene core to the TCBD units result in the appearance of new absorption bands in the visible region, which are also strongly active in ECD spectroscopy. By comparing the bis-substituted system 1c with former results on carbo[6]helicene grafted with two ethynyl-DPP units, we highlighted here a case of exciton coupling involving charge-transfer excitations which originate in the helicene \( \pi \)-system. This aspect of generating a strong ECD response from exciton coupling in symmetrical \( \pi \)-helical push-pull systems is very promising for future development of highly responsive chiral materials. Therefore, these two helicene push-pull systems emerge as complementary ones for future applications. Indeed, since the helicene-DPP units are strongly emissive and display good CPL activity, they may find applications as chiral emitters for bioimaging or in chiral OLEDs technology. On the contrary, the helicene-TCBD compounds are not emissive but display strong charge transfers, and may therefore be useful for charge transport applications or as chiral electron-accepting platforms for chiral sensing. Furthermore, two-photon absorption was also measured for 1b and 1c and was found higher is 1b than in 1c, due to symmetry considerations. Comparison of experimental two-photon circular dichroic responses between these two derivatives will be performed in the near future. Finally, we showed that grafting electron-accepting substituents such as TCBDs can give access to new types of redox-triggered chiroptical switches.
Theoretical and experimental methods for TPA

The theoretical approach employed here was based on the success of the approach used in previous studies of this class of molecules.[6,8a,38-40] The molecular structures of 1b and 1c were DFT-optimized using the B3LYP[35-37] hybrid functional with the 6-311G(d,p)[41-43] basis set in Gaussian 09.[44] TDDFT calculations of 20 excited states for each molecule were performed with the CAM-B3LYP[38] using the aforementioned basis set for 1b and 6-31G(d)[44-46] for 1c in Dalton 2013.[46] TPA spectra were calculated using:[47-48] 

$$\delta TPA(\omega) = \frac{4\pi\epsilon_0\alpha}{c} \int \sum_{f} (\omega)\frac{\delta_{\omega f}}{\delta_{\omega f} + \delta_{\omega f}} g(2\omega, \omega_f, \Gamma),$$  

$$\delta TPA(\omega) = 1.2527 \times 10^{-2} \times \omega^2 \sum_{f} \delta_{\omega f} g(2\omega, \omega_f, \Gamma)$$

where \(c\) is the speed of light in vacuum, \(a_0\) is the Bohr’s radius, \(\alpha\) is the fine structure constant, \(\epsilon = h\omega/a_0\) is the photon energy (half of the transition energy for the degenerate case), \(\delta_{\omega f}/\delta_{\omega f} g(2\omega, \omega_f, \Gamma)\) is the orientational averaged two-photon probability for the degenerate case and \(\omega\) is the excitation frequency. A normalized Lorentzian lineshape function \((g(2\omega, \omega_f, \Gamma))\) was used to broaden electronic transitions:

$$g(2\omega, \omega_f, \Gamma) = \frac{1}{\pi} \frac{\Gamma_{\omega f}/2}{(\omega - 2\omega_f)^2 + (\Gamma_{\omega f}/2)^2}$$

Here \(\Gamma\) is the FWHM linewidth for all transitions, in this specific case, 0.07 and 0.08 eV for 1b and 1c, respectively, to best fit experimental spectra. The calculated TPA spectra are in Goppert-Mayer units (GM), i.e. \(10^{-39}\text{eVcm}^2\cdot\text{s}\cdot\text{molec}^{-1}\cdot\text{photon}^{-1}\) when atomic units are used for the elements in Eqs. (1) and (2).

TPA measurements were performed on dichloromethane solutions with concentrations of 0.0025 M and 0.015 M for 1b and 1c, respectively, using the open aperture z-scan technique.[49-50] Two-photon excitation was induced with a computer-controlled femtosecond optical parametric amplifier (OPera Solo) pumped by a COHERENT amplified laser system. The system is capable of generating 90 fs (FWHM) pulses from 240 nm to 2.6 µm with pulse energies up to 350 µJ. Experiments were performed using a 50 Hz repetition rate to avoid possible contribution from cumulative effects.

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Keywords: helicene • tetracyanobutadiene • chiroptical activity • charge transfer • two-photon absorption


A new type of π-helical push-pull molecules has been prepared, consisting of helicene grafted with tetracyanobutadienes as accepting substituents.