RNA-Protein Interaction Prediction via Sequence Embeddings

Dominika Matus, Frederic Runge, Jörg K. H. Franke,
Lars Gerne, Michael Uhl, Frank Hutter & Rolf Backofen
Department of Computer Science
University of Freiburg
Georges-Köhler Allee 74
79110, Freiburg, Germany
matusd@informatik.uni-freiburg.de

Abstract

RNA-protein interactions (RPI) are ubiquitous in cellular organisms and essential for gene regulation. In particular, protein interactions with non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs) play a critical role in these processes. Experimental analysis of RPIs is time-consuming and expensive, and existing computational methods rely on small and limited datasets. This work introduces *RNAInterAct*, a comprehensive RPI dataset, alongside *RPIembeddor*, a novel transformer-based model designed for classifying ncRNA-protein interactions. By leveraging two foundation models for sequence embedding, we incorporate essential structural and functional insights into our task. We demonstrate RPIembeddor's strong performance and generalization capability compared to state-of-the-art methods across different datasets and analyze the impact of the proposed embedding strategy on the performance in an ablation study.

1 Introduction

The discovery that 85% of the human genome is transcribed into ribonucleic acid (RNA), while only about 2% of these RNAs code for proteins (Birney et al., 2007; Consortium et al., 2012), has shifted our view of RNA from a mere translator between DNA and proteins to one of the most crucial cellular regulators. Although the functions of many non-coding RNAs (ncRNAs) remain unknown, it is widely acknowledged that their interactions with proteins are one of the driving forces for cellular functions, particularly in gene regulation and epigenetics (Oksuz et al., 2023; Statello et al., 2021; Mangiavacchi et al., 2023). However, experimental analysis of these interactions, e.g., via systematic evolution of ligands by exponential enrichment (SELEX) (Tuerk & Gold, 1990), is time-consuming and expensive. *In silico* methods capable of distinguishing between interacting and non-interacting RNA-protein pairs could significantly reduce these costs.

Deep learning based methods recently set novel ground across a variety of applications in molecular research (Alipanahi et al., 2015b; Ronneberger et al., 2015; Baek et al., 2021; Jumper et al., 2021; Baek et al., 2023). Additionally, meta-learning across tasks has demonstrated its potential to significantly improve the performance of deep learning models (Singh et al., 2019), particularly when labeled data is scarce - a common challenge in RNA-protein interaction (RPI) prediction tasks. While machine learning approaches to classify RPIs exist (Muppirala et al., 2011; Pan et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2018), the application of meta-learning strategies to leverage the diverse characteristics of various RNAs and proteins for this task remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, interactions typically hinge on structural features in addition to sequence information, which, for RNAs are not widely available at a large scale. An algorithm capable of accurately classifying ncRNA-protein in-

Preprint. Under review.

teraction solely from sequence inputs and applicable across a wide range of interaction types would be highly valuable.

In this study, we introduce *RPIembeddor*, a novel and comprehensive approach for classifying ncRNA-protein interactions that addresses these challenges. We compile an extensive dataset of positive RPI entries from the RNAInter database (Kang et al., 2022) and enrich it with carefully generated negative examples, leveraging both sequence and structure features of the RNA and protein interactors. We employ two foundation models, RNA-FM (Chen et al., 2022a) and ESM-fold (Lin et al., 2022), to generate embeddings for the RNA and protein sequences. These are then used to train an attention-based model, designed for binary RPI classification.

Our main contributions are as follows:

- We build *RNAInterAct*[1], an extensive dataset for ncRNA-protein interaction prediction, derived from the RNAInter (Kang et al., 2022) database. *RNAInterAct* comprises $73,362$ negative and $35,852$ positive interactions across 976 unique RNA families. To ensure rigorous evaluation, we meticulously curate two subsets, *TRinter* for training and *TSfam* for testing, with consideration to prevent any overlap in RNA families between the test set and the training set, thereby eliminating homology bias.
- We introduce *RPIembeddor*, a novel algorithm for ncRNA-protein interaction prediction that utilizes embeddings from two foundational models within an attention-based framework. Further, we demonstrate its superior generalization capabilities when benchmarked against state-of-the-art models across various test sets, marking a significant advancement in the field.
- Through a comprehensive ablation study, we validate the usefulness of the selected embeddings, illustrating how they critically enhance model performance.

2 Related work

Due to the limited amount of experimentally derived RNA-protein complex structure data, machine learning methods typically rely on sequence information (RNA and/or protein) to predict RPIs (Bheemireddy et al., 2022). As an RNA-binding protein can bind to many different RNA sequences with varying affinity (depending on the presence and arrangement of specific RNA structure and/or sequence recognition motifs), experimental interaction datasets for a specific protein can contain from thousands up to tens of thousands RNA targets. These datasets (typically obtained from CLIP-seq experiments (Hafner et al., 2021)) are common and readily available, so most of the available computational methods use them to train protein-specific models to predict the protein binding sites on given RNA sequences (Pan et al., 2019; Uhl et al., 2021). Consequently, these models depend on the availability of a sufficiently large interaction dataset for a protein of interest. However, for example, out of the estimated 2,000 (possibly more) human RBPs (Brannan et al., 2016; Hentze et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019), such datasets only exist for a few hundred RBPs, showcasing the need for alternative approaches. To study this vast space of unexplored RPIs, a particularly useful extension are approaches that predict whether any given RNA and protein interact based on their sequences. To date, only a limited number of methods have been developed for predicting RPIs using solely the sequence information of ncRNAs and proteins To the best of our knowledge, these include RPIseq (Muppirala et al., 2011), IncPro (Lu et al., 2013), IPMiner (Pan et al., 2016), and XRPI (Jain et al., 2018). In the following, we will focus on XRPI and IPMiner, since they show to outperform the previous two methods. Detailed description of the respective tools can be found in Appendix A.

3 Data

The foundation of our study on predicting RPIs is an extensive, meticulously compiled, and processed dataset. We provide a concise overview of our data pipeline in this section, with a more detailed description available in the Appendix B.

Data Preparation We use the RNA Interactome Database (RNAInter) (Kang et al., 2022) with over 47 million RNA interactions across 156 different species as the basis for our dataset. Among

[1] To support future work in the field, we make our dataset publicly available upon acceptance.

Table 1: Overview of the datasets used in this work.

Feature	TRinter	TSfam	RPI2825
Unique RNA Families	976	172	N/A
Unique Protein Clans	152	152	N/A
Positive Interactions	35,852	4,887	871
Negative Interactions	73,362	8,116	0
Total Interactions	109,214	13,003	871

these, RPIs are particularly prominent, with 37,067,587 entries. Even though RNAInter does not directly provide sequence information, we obtain it by cross-linking different large-scale databases like NCBI (Benson et al., 2012), UniProt (Consortium, 2019), or Ensembl (Cunningham et al., 2022). To enable informed negative interaction generation, we perform an extensive annotation using the Rfam (Kalvari et al., 2021) and Pfam (Mistry et al., 2020) databases, assigning RNA families and protein clans to each unique interactor. Our refinement process includes setting a length cutoff at 1024 nucleotides and amino acids, limiting the number of interactions per interactor to 150, and excluding mRNAs from the dataset. After careful curation of the negative examples by leveraging RNA family and protein clan information to ensure biological relevance, the *RNAInterAct* dataset encompasses a total of 122,217 interactions between ncRNAs and proteins with a 1:2 ratio of positive and negative interactions.

Train and Test Sets RNAInterAct serves as a foundation for our derived training and test sets, *TRinter* and *TSfam*, respectively. We strategically divide RNAInterAct based on the RNA families involved, ensuring no RNA family overlap between TRinter and TSfam. This approach is grounded in the understanding that RNA families consist of RNAs with conserved nucleotide sequences, sharing common structural features and, typically, similar functions. Evaluation on such a test set ensures the assessment of the model's true generalization capabilities, in stark contrast to the limited insights gained from random splits of training and testing data.

In addition to evaluating *RPIembeddor* on the TSfam, we also assess it using the widely recognized RPI2825 dataset Muppirala et al. (2011); Jain et al. (2018). This step allows us to examine the model's ability to generalize across a distinct distribution of examples since RPI2825 comprises exclusively positive interactions. Consistent with our methodology, we apply the same sequence length restriction of 1024 nucleotides/amino acids to this dataset. A comparative overview of the datasets utilized in our evaluations is presented in Table 1.

4 Method

In this section, we detail *RPIembeddor*, our proposed approach for RPI classification.

Embeddings The centerpiece of our model involves leveraging RNA and protein embeddings from pre-trained models to incorporate structural and functional insights into our interaction prediction task. For RNA sequences, we employ the transformer-based RNA Foundation Model (RNA-FM) Chen et al. (2022b), which was trained on a massive corpus of 23 million unlabeled non-coding RNAs from RNAcentral Consortium et al. (2017) using self-supervised learning. For protein sequences, we utilize Evolutionary Scale Modeling 2 (ESM-2) Lin et al. (2022), a transformer-based language model trained on the UniRef database Suzek et al. (2014) that specializes in predicting protein folding from amino acid sequences. Contrasting with the well-known AlphaFold Jumper et al. (2021), ESM-2 operates without the need for multiple sequence alignments (MSAs), making it a more fitting option for our requirements. We opt for the 30-layer version of ESM-2 with 150 million parameters to match RNA-FM's embedding size of 640. Given that RNA-protein interactions hinge critically on the structures and functional characteristics of the molecules involved, the combined use of embeddings from these two models offers a comprehensive view of potential interaction sites and mechanisms, promising performance improvement on the RPI classification task.

Model After processing the inputs with RNA-FM and ESM-2, we obtain two embeddings, each of size $N \times 640$ with N being the input sequence length. These embeddings are then fed into our transformer-based model, RPIembeddor. To address the possibility of variable lengths of RNA and protein sequences while ensuring compatibility, we implement two parallel feed-forward layers that

normalize the size of the input embeddings. Subsequently, the embeddings undergo processing in an encoder layer designed to treat them symmetrically, ensuring they have equal influence on the model's final output probability. This symmetrical processing is crucial as it allows our model to dynamically focus on specific parts of the sequences that are most relevant for predicting interactions, leveraging the strengths of the attention mechanism. By doing so, attention facilitates the model's ability to capture complex dependencies between RNA and protein sequences. The resulting latent representations are concatenated and processed through a series of feed-forward layers, culminating in a linear layer with a sigmoid activation function to produce output class probabilities. The architectural choices result in the model size of 1.4M parameters. For the task of RPI classification, we employ a binary loss function and optimize the model using a combination of linear warm-up and cosine annealing strategies with the AdamW optimizer Loshchilov & Hutter (2019a). For a detailed overview of RPIembeddor's architecture and hyperparameters, please refer to Appendix C.1.

5 Experiments

To evaluate *RPIembeddor*'s efficacy, we conduct two sets of experiments. First, we compare its performance against state-of-the-art methods, IPMiner (Pan et al., 2016) and XRPI (Jain et al., 2018), on both the *TSfam* dataset and the RPI2825 dataset (Section 5.1). Secondly, through an ablation study, we analyze the impact of embeddings on model performance (Section 5.2).

5.1 Benchmarking on TSfam and RPI2825

Setup We evaluate RPIembeddor against IPMiner and XRPI, reporting key performance metrics such as binary precision, recall, F1 score, and accuracy. For a robust evaluation, RPIembeddor is trained using three distinct random seeds over 90 epochs. We then aggregate the results to report the average performance alongside the standard deviation. All results are summarized in Table 2.

Data We evaluate all models on the TSfam dataset and on the commonly used RPI2825 dataset from the literature. It is important to note that these datasets feature distinctly different distributions of positive and negative interaction examples (as detailed in Table 1).

TSfam We observe that RPIembeddor demonstrably outperforms competing models, achieving an F1 score of 0.586 ($\pm$0.010) and an accuracy of 0.667 ($\pm$0.009). Specifically, our model correctly classifies 2,971 out of 4,887 positive interactions and 5,586 out of 8,116 negative ones. In comparison, IPMiner predicts 1,830 true positives and 4,826 true negatives. Notably, XRPI exhibits a significant bias towards positive classifications, predicting approximately 91% of interactions (11,832 out of 13,003) as positive, despite the dataset comprising roughly 62% negative examples. We illustrate Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curves for all three models in Figure 1.

RPI2825 The RPI2825 dataset comprised exclusively of positive interactions presents a challenge for RPIembeddor. Despite this, our model demonstrates robust generalization, achieving the second-best F1 score of 0.8 ($\pm$0.049), giving in to XRPI with an impressive F1 score of 0.991. However, caution is warranted in interpreting XRPI's performance, as our experiments on TSfam revealed its tendency to predict significantly more positive interactions than negatives. This bias is evident in the RPI2825 results where XRPI classifies 98% of the interactions as positive (855 out of 871), with only 1.8% (16 out of 871) classified as negative. This serves as a concluding evidence for a strong bias towards positive predictions for XRPI. Importantly, our analysis suggests that RPIembeddor's performance is not merely a reflection of the training data distribution, as it effectively generalizes to unseen data distributions despite the majority class in training sets being negative interactions, unlike the positive-only RPI2825 test set. This underscores the robustness and versatility of RPIembeddor in handling diverse datasets.

5.2 Ablation Study

In this section, we evaluate the contributions of protein- and RNA embeddings to the performance of our model. We conduct the analysis in two parts: (i) by replacing the protein- or RNA input embedding with a random embedding of the same size to investigate whether both embeddings contribute equally to the performance, and (ii) by replacing both input embeddings with one-hot encodings of the input sequences to test whether our embeddings are superior to simpler representations in capturing the relationships between the RNA and protein sequences.

Table 2: Mean performance and standard deviation across three seeds of the RPIembeddor in comparison to state-of-the-art models.

Model	TSfam				RPI2825			
	Prec.	Rec.	F1	Acc.	Prec.	Rec.	F1	Acc.
RPIembeddor	**0.550 ±0.010**	0.627 ±0.017	**0.586 ±0.013**	**0.667 ±0.009**	**1.0 ±0.0**	0.667 ±0.085	0.8 ±0.049	0.667 ±0.085
IPMiner	0.357	0.375	0.366	0.512	**1.0**	0.107	0.193	0.107
XRPI	0.375	**0.909**	0.531	0.398	**1.0**	**0.982**	**0.991**	**0.982**

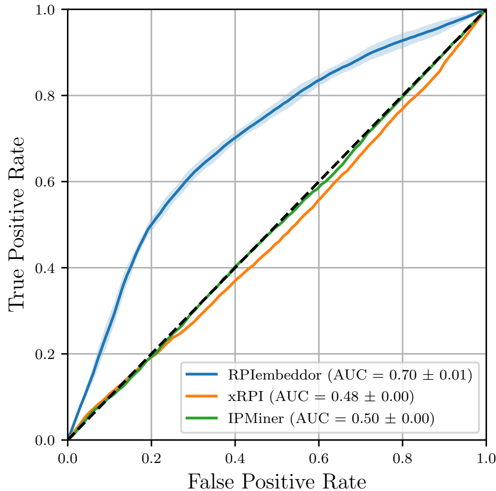

Figure 1: Receiver Operating Characteristics comparison on TSfam.

Setup In our study, we train one distinct model for each of the following configurations: *random-protein* where only the protein embedding is utilized; *random-RNA* using only the RNA embedding; *one-hot*, where both RNA and protein sequences are represented using one-hot encodings. We compare models performance against RPIembeddor, which incorporates RNA-FM and ESM-2 embeddings, on the TSfam dataset. To ensure the reliability of our results, each model configuration is evaluated across three unique random seeds.

Results The outcomes of each experimental setting are detailed in Table 3. Interestingly, we find that RPIembeddor in all three configurations consistently behaves as a negative classifier, predicting only negative examples. This pattern decisively underscores the significant role that both protein and RNA embeddings play in the model's ability to perform effectively.

6 Conclusion

Our work introduces *RPIembeddor*, a transformative approach to RNA-protein interaction (RPI) prediction that harnesses the power of embeddings from two foundational models. Using a meta-learning strategy to learn RPIs across different RNA and protein types, our method outperforms existing methods while generalizing to unseen data distributions. We believe that our approach bears great potential for future RPI prediction endeavors and we support this research by making our new dataset *RNAInterAct* publicly available upon acceptance. Acknowledging the limitations tied to foundational model dependencies and sequence length constraints, our future directions include exploring alternative embeddings, e.g., from RNA structure models like the RNAformer Franke et al. (2023) or other foundation models, to extend the applicability of our approach.

Table 3: Results of the ablation study.

Model	Prec.	Rec.	F1	Acc.
RPIembeddor	**0.563 ± 0.019**	**0.659 ± 0.071**	**0.605 ± 0.019**	**0.678 ± 0.009**
One-Hot	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	0.624 ± 0.0
Random-Protein	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	0.624 ± 0.0
Random-RNA	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	0.624 ± 0.0

7 Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) under SFB 1597 (SmallData), grant no. 499552394, and through grant no. 417962828. Dominika Matus acknowledges funding by the Konrad Zuse School of Excellence in Learning and Intelligent Systems (ELIZA) through Master's in AI scholarship. We also acknowledge support by the state of Baden-Württemberg through bwHPC and the German Research Foundation (DFG) through grant no INST 39/963-1 FUGG. Finally, we acknowledge funding by the European Union (via ERC Consolidator Grant DeepLearning 2.0, grant no. 101045765). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

References

Babak Alipanahi, Andrew Delong, Matthew T. Weirauch, and Brendan J. Frey. Predicting the sequence specificities of dna- and rna-binding proteins by deep learning. *Nature Biotechnology*, 33 (8):831–838, 2015a.

Babak Alipanahi, Andrew Delong, Matthew T Weirauch, and Brendan J Frey. Predicting the sequence specificities of dna-and rna-binding proteins by deep learning. *Nature biotechnology*, 33 (8):831–838, 2015b.

Minkyung Baek, Frank DiMaio, Ivan Anishchenko, Justas Dauparas, Sergey Ovchinnikov, Gyu Rie Lee, Jue Wang, Qian Cong, Lisa N Kinch, R Dustin Schaeffer, et al. Accurate prediction of protein structures and interactions using a three-track neural network. *Science*, 373(6557):871–876, 2021.

Minkyung Baek, Ryan McHugh, Ivan Anishchenko, Hanlun Jiang, David Baker, and Frank DiMaio. Accurate prediction of protein–nucleic acid complexes using rosettafoldna. *Nature Methods*, pp. 1–5, 2023.

Dennis A Benson, Mark Cavanaugh, Karen Clark, Ilene Karsch-Mizrachi, David J Lipman, James Ostell, and Eric W Sayers. Genbank. *Nucleic acids research*, 41(D1):D36–D42, 2012.

Sneha Bheemireddy, Sankaran Sandhya, Narayanaswamy Srinivasan, and Ramanathan Sowdhamini. Computational tools to study rna-protein complexes. *Frontiers in molecular biosciences*, 9:954926, 2022.

E Birney, JA Stamatoyannopoulos, A Dutta, R Guigó, TR Gingeras, EH Margulies, Z Weng, M Snyder, ET Dermitzakis, RE Thurman, et al. Identification and analysis of functional elements in 1% of the human genome by the encode pilot project. *Nature*, 447(7146):799–816, 2007.

Benoit LP Bouvrette, S Bovaird, M Blanchette, and E Lécuyer. ornament: a database of putative rna binding protein target sites in the transcriptomes of model species. *Nucleic Acids Research*, 48(D1):D166–D173, Jan 8 2020. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkz986.

Nadav Brandes, Dan Ofer, Yam Peleg, Nadav Rappoport, and Michal Linial. ProteinBERT: a universal deep-learning model of protein sequence and function. *Bioinformatics*, 38(8):2102–2110,

02 2022. ISSN 1367-4803. doi: 10.1093/bioinformatics/btac020. URL `https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btac020`.

Kristopher W Brannan, Wenhao Jin, Stephanie C Huelga, Charles AS Banks, Joshua M Gilmore, Laurence Florens, Michael P Washburn, Eric L Van Nostrand, Gabriel A Pratt, Marie K Schwinn, et al. Sonar discovers rna-binding proteins from analysis of large-scale protein-protein interactomes. *Molecular cell*, 64(2):282–293, 2016.

Jiayang Chen, Zhihang Hu, Siqi Sun, Qingxiong Tan, Yixuan Wang, Qinze Yu, Licheng Zong, Liang Hong, Jin Xiao, Irwin King, et al. Interpretable rna foundation model from unannotated data for highly accurate rna structure and function predictions. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2204.00300*, 2022a.

Jiayang Chen, Zhihang Hu, Siqi Sun, Qingxiong Tan, Yixuan Wang, Qinze Yu, Licheng Zong, Liang Hong, Jin Xiao, Tao Shen, Irwin King, and Yu Li. Interpretable rna foundation model from unannotated data for highly accurate rna structure and function predictions, 2022b. URL `https://arxiv.org/abs/2204.00300`.

Yanyi Chu, Dan Yu, Yupeng Li, Kaixuan Huang, Yue Shen, Le Cong, Jason Zhang, and Mengdi Wang. A 5'utr language model for decoding untranslated regions of mrna and function predictions. *bioRxiv*, pp. 2023–10, 2023.

ENCODE Project Consortium et al. An integrated encyclopedia of dna elements in the human genome. *Nature*, 489(7414):57, 2012.

The RNAcentral Consortium, AI Petrov, SJE Kay, I Kalvari, KL Howe, KA Gray, EA Bruford, PJ Kersey, G Cochrane, RD Finn, A Bateman, A Kozomara, S Griffiths-Jones, A Frankish, CW Zwieb, BY Lau, KP Williams, PP Chan, TM Lowe, JJ Cannone, R Gutell, MA Machnicka, JM Bujnicki, M Yoshihama, N Kenmochi, B Chai, JR Cole, M Szymanski, WM Karlowski, V Wood, E Huala, TZ Berardini, Y Zhao, R Chen, W Zhu, MD Paraskevopoulou, IS Vlachos, AG Hatzigeorgiou, L Ma, Z Zhang, J Puetz, PF Stadler, D McDonald, S Basu, P Fey, SR Engel, JM Cherry, PJ Volders, P Mestdagh, J Wower, MB Clark, XC Quek, and ME Dinger. Rnacentral: a comprehensive database of non-coding rna sequences. *Nucleic Acids Research*, 45(D1):D128–D134, 2017. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkw1008. URL `https://doi.org/10.1093/nar/gkw1008`. Epub 2016 Oct 28.

UniProt Consortium. Uniprot: a worldwide hub of protein knowledge. *Nucleic acids research*, 47 (D1):D506–D515, 2019.

Fiona Cunningham, James E Allen, Jamie Allen, Jorge Alvarez-Jarreta, M Ridwan Amode, Irina M Armean, Olanrewaju Austine-Orimoloye, Andrey G Azov, If Barnes, Ruth Bennett, et al. Ensembl 2022. *Nucleic acids research*, 50(D1):D988–D995, 2022.

Jörg K.H. Franke, Frederic Runge, and Frank Hutter. Scalable deep learning for rna secondary structure prediction. *ArXiv*, abs/2307.10073, 2023.

Markus Hafner, Maria Katsantoni, Tino Köster, James Marks, Joyita Mukherjee, Dorothee Staiger, Jernej Ule, and Mihaela Zavolan. Clip and complementary methods. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 1(1):20, 2021.

Matthias W Hentze, Alfredo Castello, Thomas Schwarzl, and Thomas Preiss. A brave new world of rna-binding proteins. *Nature reviews Molecular cell biology*, 19(5):327–341, 2018.

Dharm Skandh Jain, Sanket Rajan Gupte, and Raviprasad Aduri. A data driven model for predicting rna-protein interactions based on gradient boosting machine. *Scientific reports*, 8(1):9552, 2018.

John Jumper, Richard Evans, Alexander Pritzel, Tim Green, Michael Figurnov, Olaf Ronneberger, Kathryn Tunyasuvunakool, Russ Bates, Augustin Žídek, Anna Potapenko, Alex Bridgland, Clemens Meyer, Simon A. A. Kohl, Andrew J. Ballard, Andrew Cowie, Bernardino Romera-Paredes, Stanislav Nikolov, Rishub Jain, Jonas Adler, Trevor Back, Stig Petersen, David Reiman, Ellen Clancy, Michal Zielinski, Martin Steinegger, Michalina Pacholska, Tamas Berghammer, Sebastian Bodenstein, David Silver, Oriol Vinyals, Andrew W. Senior, Koray Kavukcuoglu, Pushmeet Kohli, and Demis Hassabis. Highly accurate protein structure prediction with alphafold. *Nature*, 596(7873):583–589, 2021. ISSN 1476-4687. doi: 10.1038/s41586-021-03819-2. URL `https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03819-2`.

Ioanna Kalvari, Eric P Nawrocki, Nancy Ontiveros-Palacios, Joanna Argasinska, Kevin Lamkiewicz, Manja Marz, Sam Griffiths-Jones, Claire Toffano-Nioche, Daniel Gautheret, Zasha Weinberg, Elena Rivas, Sean R Eddy, Robert D Finn, Alex Bateman, and Anton I Petrov. Rfam 14: expanded coverage of metagenomic, viral and microrna families. *Nucleic Acids Research*, 49 (D1):D192–D200, 2021. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkaa1047.

Juanjuan Kang, Qiang Tang, Jun He, Le Li, Nianling Yang, Shuiyan Yu, Mengyao Wang, Yuchen Zhang, Jiahao Lin, Tianyu Cui, Yongfei Hu, Puwen Tan, Jun Cheng, Hailong Zheng, Dong Wang, Xi Su, Wei Chen, and Yan Huang. Rnainter v4.0: Rna interactome repository with redefined confidence scoring system and improved accessibility. *Nucleic Acids Research*, 2022. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkab997.

Sizhen Li, Saeed Moayedpour, Ruijiang Li, Michael Bailey, Saleh Riahi, Lorenzo Kogler-Anele, Milad Miladi, Jacob Miner, Dinghai Zheng, Jun Wang, et al. Codonbert: Large language models for mrna design and optimization. *bioRxiv*, pp. 2023–09, 2023.

Zeming Lin, Halil Akin, Roshan Rao, Brian Hie, Zhongkai Zhu, Wenting Lu, Allan dos Santos Costa, Maryam Fazel-Zarandi, Tom Sercu, Sal Candido, and Alexander Rives. Language models of protein sequences at the scale of evolution enable accurate structure prediction. *bioRxiv*, 2022. doi: 10.1101/2022.07.20.500902. URL https://www.biorxiv.org/content/early/2022/07/21/2022.07.20.500902.

Lichao Liu, Tong Li, Guang Song, Qingxia He, Yafei Yin, J Yuyang Lu, Xianju Bi, Kaili Wang, Sai Luo, Yu-Sheng Chen, et al. Insight into novel rna-binding activities via large-scale analysis of lncrna-bound proteome and idh1-bound transcriptome. *Nucleic acids research*, 47(5):2244–2262, 2019.

Ilya Loshchilov and Frank Hutter. Decoupled weight decay regularization. *arXiv*, abs/1711.05101, 2019a. URL https://arxiv.org/abs/1711.05101.

Ilya Loshchilov and Frank Hutter. Decoupled weight decay regularization. In *International Conference on Learning Representations*, 2019b.

Qiongshi Lu, Sijin Ren, Ming Lu, Yong Zhang, Dahai Zhu, Xuegong Zhang, and Tingting Li. Computational prediction of associations between long non-coding rnas and proteins. *BMC genomics*, 14(1):1–10, 2013.

Arianna Mangiavacchi, Gabriele Morelli, and Valerio Orlando. Behind the scenes: How rna orchestrates the epigenetic regulation of gene expression. *Frontiers in Cell and Developmental Biology*, 11:1123975, 2023.

J. Mistry, S. Chuguransky, L. Williams, M. Qureshi, G.A. Salazar, E.L.L. Sonnhammer, S.C.E. Tosatto, L. Paladin, S. Raj, L.J. Richardson, R.D. Finn, and A. Bateman. Pfam: The protein families database in 2021. *Nucleic Acids Research*, 2020. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkaa913.

Usha K. Muppirala, Vasant G. Honavar, and Drena Dobbs. Predicting rna-protein interactions using only sequence information. *BMC Bioinformatics*, 12(1):489, 2011. ISSN 1471-2105. doi: 10.1186/1471-2105-12-489. URL https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2105-12-489. Published 2011 Dec 22.

Eric P Nawrocki and Sean R Eddy. Infernal 1.1: 100-fold faster rna homology searches. *Bioinformatics*, 29(22):2933–2935, 2013.

Ozgur Oksuz, Jonathan E Henninger, Robert Warneford-Thomson, Ming M Zheng, Hailey Erb, Adrienne Vancura, Kalon J Overholt, Susana Wilson Hawken, Salman F Banani, Richard Lauman, et al. Transcription factors interact with rna to regulate genes. *Molecular Cell*, 83(14):2449–2463, 2023.

Xiaoyong Pan, Yong-Xian Fan, Junchi Yan, and Hong-Bin Shen. Ipminer: hidden ncrna-protein interaction sequential pattern mining with stacked autoencoder for accurate computational prediction. *BMC Genomics*, 17(1):582, 2016. ISSN 1471-2164. doi: 10.1186/s12864-016-2931-8. URL https://doi.org/10.1186/s12864-016-2931-8. Published 2016 Aug 9.

Xiaoyong Pan, Yang Yang, Chun-Qiu Xia, Aashiq H Mirza, and Hong-Bin Shen. Recent methodology progress of deep learning for rna–protein interaction prediction. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: RNA*, 10(6):e1544, 2019.

Olaf Ronneberger, Philipp Fischer, and Thomas Brox. U-net: Convolutional networks for biomedical image segmentation. In *Medical Image Computing and Computer-Assisted Intervention–MICCAI 2015: 18th International Conference, Munich, Germany, October 5-9, 2015, Proceedings, Part III 18*, pp. 234–241. Springer, 2015.

Jaswinder Singh, Jack Hanson, Kuldip Paliwal, and Yaoqi Zhou. Rna secondary structure prediction using an ensemble of two-dimensional deep neural networks and transfer learning. *Nature communications*, 10(1):1–13, 2019.

Luisa Statello, Chun-Jie Guo, Ling-Ling Chen, and Maite Huarte. Gene regulation by long noncoding rnas and its biological functions. *Nature reviews Molecular cell biology*, 22(2):96–118, 2021.

Baris E. Suzek, Yuqi Wang, Hongzhan Huang, Peter B. McGarvey, Cathy H. Wu, and the UniProt Consortium. Uniref clusters: a comprehensive and scalable alternative for improving sequence similarity searches. *Bioinformatics*, 31(6):926–932, 11 2014. ISSN 1367-4803. doi: 10.1093/bioinformatics/btu739. URL `https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btu739`.

Xueyi Teng, Xiaomin Chen, Hua Xue, Yiheng Tang, Peng Zhang, Quan Kang, Yajing Hao, Runsheng Chen, Yi Zhao, and Shunmin He. Npinter v4.0: an integrated database of ncrna interactions. *Nucleic Acids Research*, 48(D1):D160–D165, Jan 8 2020. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkz1048.

Craig Tuerk and Larry Gold. Systematic evolution of ligands by exponential enrichment: Rna ligands to bacteriophage t4 dna polymerase. *science*, 249(4968):505–510, 1990.

Michael Uhl, Van Dinh Tran, Florian Heyl, and Rolf Backofen. Rnaprot: an efficient and feature-rich rna binding protein binding site predictor. *GigaScience*, 10(8):giab054, 2021.

Ashish Vaswani, Noam Shazeer, Niki Parmar, Jakob Uszkoreit, Llion Jones, Aidan N Gomez, Ł ukasz Kaiser, and Illia Polosukhin. Attention is all you need. In I. Guyon, U. Von Luxburg, S. Bengio, H. Wallach, R. Fergus, S. Vishwanathan, and R. Garnett (eds.), *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems*, volume 30. Curran Associates, Inc., 2017.

Yuning Yang, Gen Li, Kuan Pang, Wuxinhao Cao, Xiangtao Li, and Zhaolei Zhang. Deciphering 3'utr mediated gene regulation using interpretable deep representation learning. *bioRxiv*, pp. 2023–09, 2023.

Hongying Zhao, Xiangzhe Yin, Haotian Xu, Kailai Liu, Wangyang Liu, Lixia Wang, Caiyu Zhang, Lin Bo, Xicheng Lan, Shihua Lin, Ke Feng, Shangwei Ning, Yunpeng Zhang, and Li Wang. Lnctard 2.0: an updated comprehensive database for experimentally-supported functional lncrna–target regulations in human diseases. *Nucleic Acids Research*, 51(D1):D199–D207, 2022. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkac984.

A Related Work

In this section, we describe tools related to our work, including RPIseq (Muppirala et al., 2011), IncPro (Lu et al., 2013), IPMiner (Pan et al., 2016), and XRPI (Jain et al., 2018).

IncPro IncPro, introduced by Lu et al. (2013), is a tool designed for predicting RNA-protein interactions using an incremental learning approach with multiple kernel learning. It is capable of handling large-scale data and integrates diverse features from RNA and protein sequences to enhance prediction accuracy. Unlike our approach, IncPro primarily relies on incremental learning, which may not adapt as effectively to new, unseen data types.

RPIseq RPIseq, developed by Muppirala et al. (2011), employs machine learning approaches, such as Random Forest and Support Vector Machines (SVM), to predict RNA-protein interactions from sequence information. It is valued for its straightforward methodology in processing RNA-protein sequence data. In contrast, our method leverages a more complex feature extraction process, which enables a deeper understanding of the underlying biological interactions.

IPMiner IPMiner, proposed by Pan et al. (2016), is a binary classifier designed to predict interactions between (nc)RNA and protein sequences. It utilizes a stacked autoencoder and a random forest classifier, where the autoencoder processes the raw input sequences to extract high-level features, which are then used by the random forest classifier to determine interaction likelihoods. This tool is noted for its improved efficiency and performance in handling diverse datasets. However, unlike IPMiner, our approach incorporates a novel deep learning method that enhances the robustness and generalizability of the predictions.

XRPI Jain et al. (2018) introduced XRPI, a tool for predicting RNA-protein interactions. Contrary to the use of deep learning techniques like CNNs, XRPI utilizes XGBoost, a boosting machine learning algorithm that has not been extensively explored in biological systems. This approach is rooted in a data-driven parameter strategy, leveraging high-resolution structures of RNA-protein complexes. In XRPI, amino acids are classified into four classes based on their interaction propensities in RPIs, and an interface size of five is considered for both proteins and RNA to account for nearest neighbor effects that control the structural context of the interactions. This method is effective in cases with limited sequence information and is anticipated to be expanded for predicting other biomolecular interactions, such as DNA-protein and protein-protein interactions.

B Data

The complete data processing pipeline is presented in Figure 2.

B.1 The RNA Interactome Database

The RNA Interactome Database (RNAInter) Kang et al. (2022) is a specialized resource in the field of molecular biology that houses an extensive collection of over 47 million RNA interactions of various types coming from 156 different species. Among these, RNA-protein interactions (RPIs) are particularly prominent, with slightly over 37 million entries. This significant volume of data underlines the importance of the complex interplay between RNA and proteins within biological systems.

RNAInter v4.0, as utilized in this project, expands on its predecessor, RNAInter v3.0, through extensive literature mining and the integration of external databases with interactions sourced from experimental evidence or computational prediction. Each entry within RNAInter v4.0 is assigned a confidence score ranging from 0 to 1, reflecting a comprehensive evaluation based on three key factors: the reliability of experimental evidence, community trust, and the specificity of cells or tissues involved. Notably, the score distribution for all interactions as presented in Figure 3 is visibly right-skewed, with the majority of entries assigned either ”weak” or ”predicted” evidence categories. However, despite this skewness indicating a potential abundance of lower-confidence interactions,

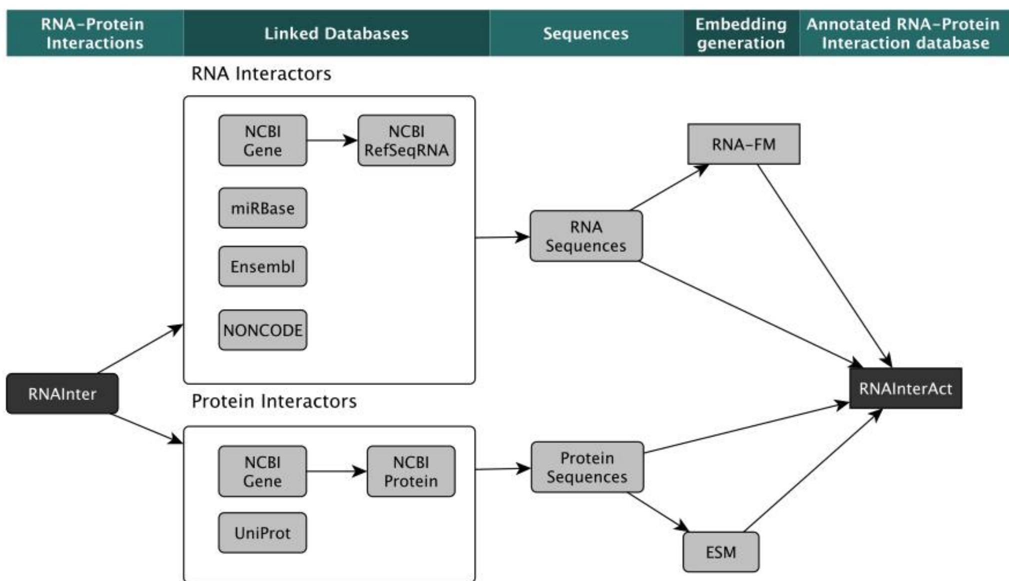

Figure 2: Data curation and processing pipeline.

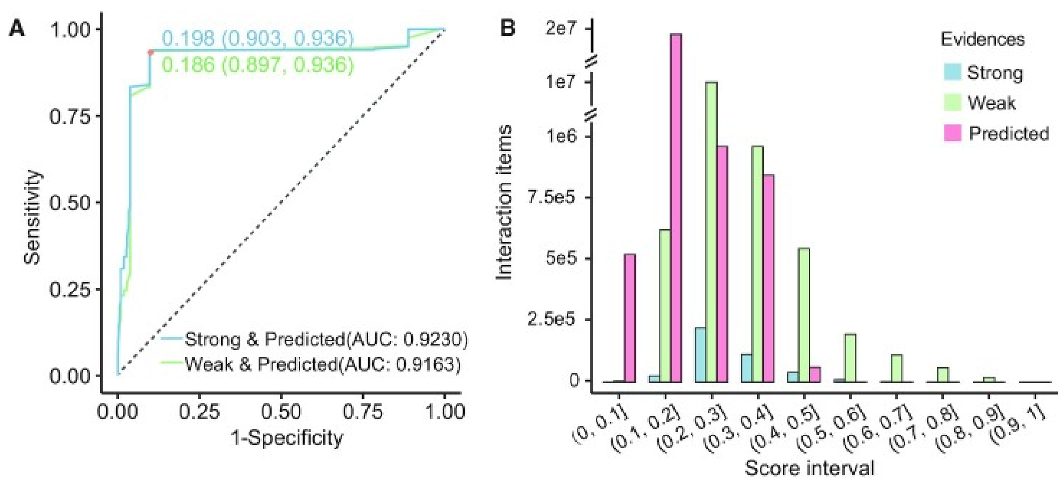

Figure 3: Evaluation of confidence scores. (A) ROC for distinguishing between experimental and predicted interactions. (B) Interaction number for each score interval. Plots are adapted from Kang et al. (2022).

the database's inclusivity in capturing a wide range of interactions, including less-studied ones, presents valuable opportunities for exploratory research.

Among the databases contributing to the RPI data are LncTarD (Zhao et al., 2022), with experimentally validated interactions; oRNAment (Bouvrette et al., 2020), a repository for computationally predicted interactions; and NPInter v4.0 (Teng et al., 2020), which includes both types. Together, these sources provide a comprehensive dataset of 37,067,587 RPI interactions, enriched with details such as species, target regions, tissues or cell lines, and homology interactions. While the entries do not explicitly include sequence information, each interactor is linked to an external database, facilitating the retrieval of such critical data for our project.

B.2 Sequence data

To complete the interaction data from the RNA Interactome Database (RNAInter) with essential sequence information, we access databases linked to each interactor in a single entry. Protein sequences are sourced from NCBI and UniProt, while for RNA sequences, our sources include miRBase, Ensembl, NONCODE, and NCBI. Besides the sequence, we also query for sequence length and specific IDs. These IDs are crucial for linking each sequence to its corresponding entry in the RNAInter database. For a detailed overview of our data extraction rates relative to RNAInter contents and the total number of sequences compiled, please refer to Table 4.

Table 4: RNAInter external databases statistics.

Database	Unique Genes	Genes Obtained	Extraction rate
RNA Databases			
Ensembl	45,235	41,086	90.83%
miRBase	11,040	3,803	34.45%
NCBI	494,057	493,849	99.96%
NONCODE	25,819	25,819	100.0%
Protein Databases			
NCBI	288,104	284,157	98.63%
UniProt	3,290	3,069	93.28%

During our data processing, we exclude any entry that lacks either sequence information or necessary IDs. We also eliminate duplicates based on the ID. This step is important because the same sequence might appear in multiple databases and be associated with different interactions in the RNAInter database. Finally, owing to the input length limitations of the foundation models employed for embedding generation, we set a maximum sequence length of 1024 for both RNA and protein molecules. That results in a total number of 38,026 protein entries and 69,043 RNA entries.

For the subsequent stages of annotation and embedding generation, our focus shifts to the individual protein and RNA sequences, rather than the interactions they form.

B.3 Annotations

Our approach to generating negative interactions, as detailed in Section B.5, builds upon the notion of similarity between different RNA or protein sequences. An established way of expressing that is through family annotation as it is done in Pfam and Rfam databases, for protein and RNA sequences respectively.

The Pfam database Mistry et al. (2020) represents a comprehensive collection of protein families, each characterized through multiple sequence alignments (MSA) and hidden Markov models (HMMs) that help identify function regions within proteins, called domains, and group them based on shared characteristics. Additionally, Pfam introduces a higher level of classification known as ’clans’, which groups together families that share a single evolutionary origin, as confirmed by similarities in sequence, structure, and profile-HMMs. For our project, we utilized Pfam 36.0, which comprises 20,795 entries and 659 clans.

The Rfam database Kalvari et al. (2021) comprises a curated collection of non-coding RNA (ncRNA) families. Each family in this database is characterized by a multiple sequence alignment and a consensus secondary structure, accompanied by a covariance model that aids in the annotation of new family members. This classification, which includes structural information, is particularly crucial for ncRNAs. Unlike protein-coding genes, ncRNAs often exhibit significant functional similarities linked to their secondary structures, even when their primary sequences show little resemblance. Such considerations are vital for an approach that utilizes primary sequence data. In our project, we access Rfam 14, encompassing 4,170 families.

We scan each unique protein sequence against the Pfam database and for recognized entries, assign a clan name. Similarly, each unique RNA sequence is scanned against the Rfam database using Infernal (Nawrocki & Eddy, 2013) tool, and, if found, annotated a family name. Results concerning the number of sequences are stored in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of family and clan annotation.

Type	Unannotated	Annotated	Families/Clans
RNA	69,043	7,847	1,148
Protein	38,026	26,575	152

B.4 Positive interactions dataset

After gathering all necessary sequence information for generating negative interactions, we then focus on creating a dataset of positive interactions. We cross-reference the annotated RNA and protein sequences, as detailed in Table 5, with the RNA Interactome Database (RNAInter). Our criterion for inclusion is an overlap of sequence IDs between our dataset and RNAInter. This process yields 488,184 interactions, which represents approximately 1% of the original RNA-protein interactions (RPI) data entries in RNAInter. Such a reduction is anticipated, given several limiting factors we applied: sequence length restrictions, the requirement for family or clan annotations, and variable extraction rates from the linked databases.

In the process of refining our dataset, we undertake several critical steps of analysis and filtering. Initially, we examine the category information of both RNA and protein sequences. From the RNA dataset, we exclude all mRNA sequences and categories that are undefined. Despite the significant role of mRNAs in RPIs, our methodology is constrained by the RNA-FM foundation model used for generating RNA embeddings. This model is exclusively pre-trained on non-coding RNAs, and including mRNAs could potentially compromise the quality of the embeddings, thereby adversely affecting prediction performance.

While we acknowledge the existence of other foundation models like CodonBERT (Li et al., 2023), UTR-LM (Chu et al., 2023), and 3UTRBERT (Yang et al., 2023), which are specialized for coding sequences (CDS), 5' untranslated regions (UTRs), and 3'UTR mRNAs respectively, their integration presents practical challenges. Given that some of the interactions in the RNAInter include genomic context, the deployment of additional foundation models would be computationally expensive and impractical for inference purposes, thus limiting the utility of our tool. Moreover, the Rfam database, as discussed in Section B.3, does not differentiate between various mRNA families, a distinction that is crucial for our approach for generating negative examples.

Consequently, after careful consideration, we remove 25,010 mRNA interactions and an additional 186 invalid RNA sequences from our dataset. The protein categories are limited to three types: transcription factors (TF), RNA-binding proteins (RBP), and general proteins. Given this concise categorization, we decide to retain all protein interactors. Following the removal of duplicates, our final dataset comprises 462,988 interactions.

In the final stage of data preparation, we impose a limit of 150 interactions per interactor. This threshold was determined through thorough analysis as an optimal balance, allowing us to maintain a reasonable number of interactions while preventing the over-representation of certain interactors in the dataset. As a result of this limitation, our collection of positive interactions is now 40,744. Given that we intend to generate two negative interactions per one positive, the dataset will eventually triple in size. This expansion ensures that even after the significant reduction in interactions, the dataset remains robust enough to support the effective performance of our model. We present the interactors' contributions per category in Table 6.

The sequence length distributions, as shown in Figure 4, indicate that RNA sequences in the RNAInter database are typically much shorter than protein sequences, with the majority falling within the range of approximately 50 to 250 nucleotides (nts). This observation validates our sequence length restriction criteria, confirming that it did not excessively exclude sequences from our dataset. On the other hand, the protein sequence length distribution appears to be normally distributed with a slight right skew. This reflects the tendency of proteins to form longer amino acid (AA) chains, corroborating their nature as generally larger molecules.

Based on the data presented in Table 7, we observe that the RNA family might be a relatively weak indicator of similarity among different RNA sequences, as it appears that, on average, each family groups together about three sequences. In contrast, Pfam clans seem to offer a more distinct separa-

Category	Percentage
miRNA	41.59%
snoRNA	33.36%
snRNA	6.74%
others	6.49%
lncRNA	4.51%
ncRNA	4.12%
rRNA	1.18%
scaRNA	1.10%
pseudo	0.39%
circRNA	0.25%
ribozyme	0.23%
sncRNA	0.03%
Mt tRNA	0.01%
misc RNA	0.00%

Category	Percentage
TF	61.06%
RBP	30.26%
Protein	8.68%

Table 6: Breakdown of RNA (left) and protein (right) categories comprising the dataset.

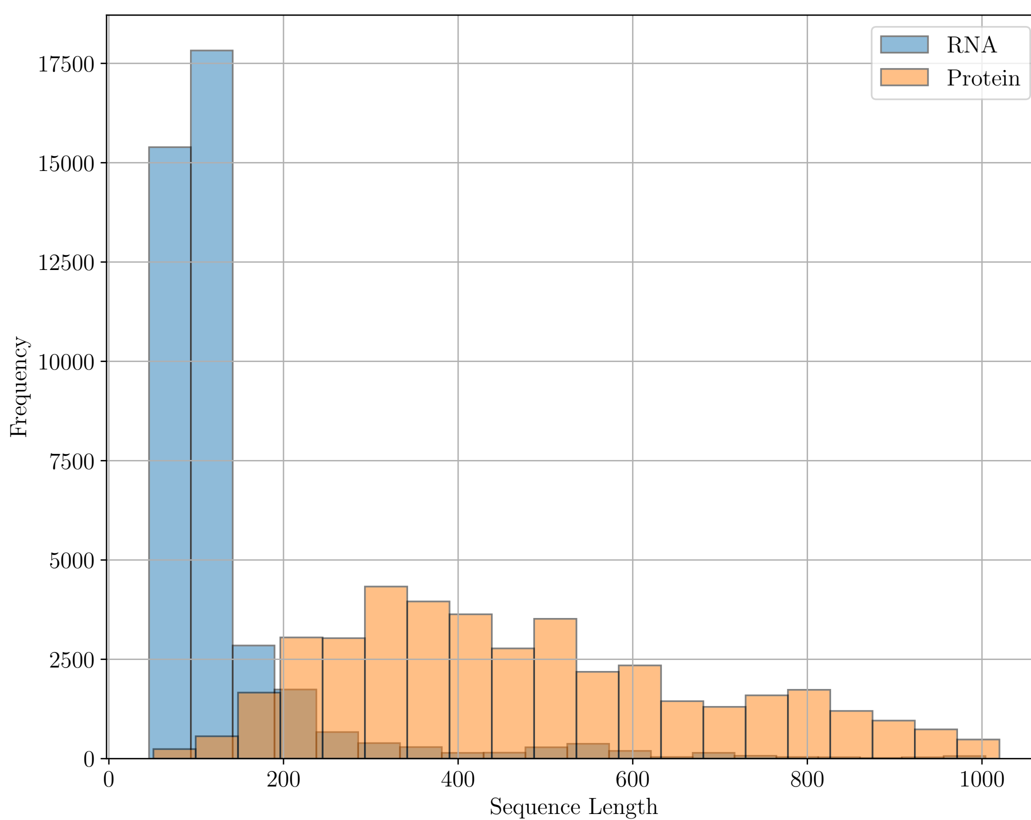

Figure 4: Sequence length distribution.

tion between protein sequence clusters, with an average of approximately nine protein sequences per clan. These annotations are crucial in our method for generating negative examples, where finding relations between interacting clans and families is key.

Finally, we examine the various types of interactions within our dataset, focusing on the categories of the interactors. While the miRNA-TF interaction type is predominant, our dataset exhibits a wide range of interaction types, highlighting its diversity.

Proteins	RNA	Pfam clans	RNA families
1308	4169	152	1148

Table 7: Overview of unique sequences, families, and clans of the dataset.

B.5 Negative interactions dataset

As discussed previously, the conventional method of generating negative interactions involves randomly selecting RNA and protein sequences not present in the positive samples. However, this approach could result in a dataset with high levels of noise, as it essentially relies on arbitrary selection without specific biological rationale.

In our proposed approach, we focus on making more informed decisions based on family/clan information and, where relevant, interactor categories. Initially, we established a network of family-clan interactions. For each RNA family member, we analyze the positive interactions dataset to identify its protein interactors, linking the RNA family to the clans of these proteins. Additionally, we annotate each RNA family with information about the protein categories that interact with its members, and each clan with data on the RNA categories interacting with its protein members. This methodology enables a broader scale analysis of RNA-protein interactions, moving beyond individual sequence analysis to understand the behavior of similar RNA and protein groups.

For each positive interaction, we generate two corresponding negative interactions, utilizing the family-clan interaction data and information on interacting categories. In the first negative interaction, we retain the original RNA interactor but pair it with a protein from a clan that does not interact with the RNA's family and, if possible, is not part of the interacting categories. Similarly, for the second negative interaction, we keep the original protein interactor and pair it with an RNA from a family that does not interact with the protein's clan and is not part of the interacting category. This approach ensures more accurate modeling of potential interactions, avoiding arbitrary pairings and focusing instead on biologically plausible non-interactions.

After merging the newly generated negative interactions dataset with the existing positive interactions dataset, we obtain a comprehensive dataset that is well-suited for binary classification tasks. Our dataset has been populated with category interactions resembling the ones in Figure 5.

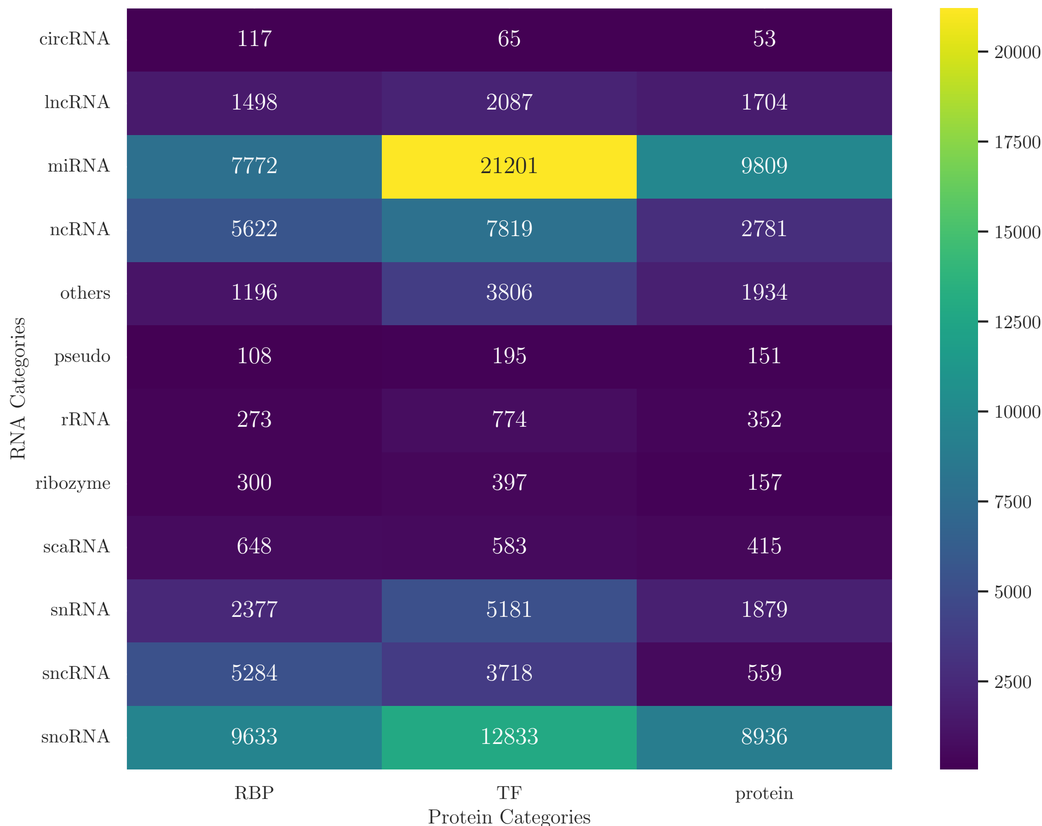

Figure 5: All interaction per RNA/protein category heatmap.

C Methods

C.1 Model

In the development of RPIembeddor, we drew significant inspiration from transformer-based architectures, which have revolutionized the field of natural language processing (NLP) and, more recently, demonstrated their applicability and effectiveness within molecular biology Jumper et al. (2021); Lin et al. (2022); Chen et al. (2022a); Alipanahi et al. (2015a); Brandes et al. (2022). The core principles of transformers Vaswani et al. (2017), particularly their ability to capture long-range dependencies through self-attention mechanisms, are exceptionally well-suited to understanding the complex, sequence-based interactions characteristic of RNA and proteins.

To tailor RPIembeddor for the domain of RNA-protein interaction prediction, we carefully calibrated its architecture, hyperparameters and optimization strategy. The model's backbone consists of an encoder with feature vectors dimensionality set to $d_{model} = 256$ and employs a multi-head attention mechanism with $n_{head} = 2$ to efficiently process sequence information. The incorporation of a single encoder layer, coupled with a deep feedforward network comprising 20 layers, strikes a balance between model complexity and interpretability.

For the optimization strategy we opted for cosine annealing scheduler with the AdamW optimizer Loshchilov & Hutter (2019b), and introduced a warm-up phase for the first 1,000 training steps, initializing scheduler with a learning rate of 0.001. This warm-up phase helps avoid too fast convergence to suboptimal solutions by gradually increasing the learning rate. Following this, the cosine annealing scheduler reduces the learning rate over time, improving the model's fine-tuning and generalization capabilities.

To prevent overfitting, we applied weight decay, setting it at 0.1, and used a dropout rate of 0.3.

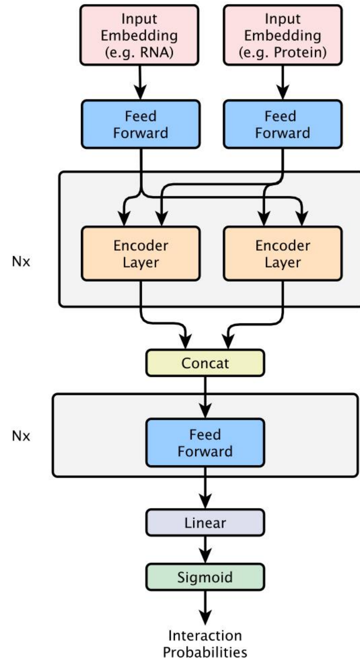

Figure 6: RPIembeddor architecture overview.

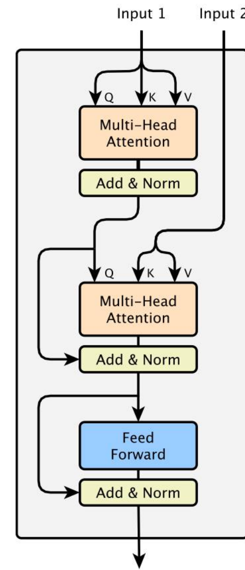

Figure 7: Encoder layer.

This hyperparemeter configuration was applied consistently across three different seeds for 90 epochs with a batch size of 64.