The SUMO pathway promotes basic helix-loop-helix proneural factor activity via a direct effect on the Zn finger protein senseless

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During development, proneural transcription factors of the basic helix-loop-helix (bHLH) family are required to commit cells to a neural fate. In *Drosophila* neurogenesis, a key mechanism promoting sense organ precursor (SOP) fate is the synergy between proneural factors and their coactivator Senseless in transcriptional activation of target genes. Here we present evidence that posttranslational modification by SUMO enhances this synergy via an effect on Senseless protein. We show that Senseless is a direct target for SUMO modification and that mutagenesis of a predicted SUMOylation motif in Senseless reduces Senseless/proneural synergy both *in vivo* and in cell culture. We propose that SUMOylation of Senseless via lysine 509 promotes its synergy with proneural proteins during transcriptional activation and hence regulates an important step in neurogenesis leading to the formation and maturation of the SOPs.

Cell fate decisions in neurogenesis require proneural proteins, which are basic helix-loop-helix (bHLH) transcription factors (7). In *Drosophila*, proneural proteins including Achaete (AC), Scute (SC), Atonal (ATO), and Amos (AMOS) are essential for the specification of sense organ precursors (SOPs) for the various sense organs of the peripheral nervous system. The proneural proteins are first expressed at low levels in groups of uncommitted ectodermal cells known as the proneural clusters. This initial expression is under the control of upstream prepatterning transcription factors, such as Pannier and Iroquois (42, 50). Subsequently, in some cells (the presumptive SOPs) proneural proteins promote upregulation of their own expression via autoregulatory enhancers. The proneural proteins bind to E-boxes within these enhancers as heterodimers with the ubiquitously expressed bHLH protein Daughterless (DA). The transition to autoregulation appears to be critical for neural commitment and downstream gene activation (15, 69). How this transition is controlled is therefore an important question. One of the factors regulating the specification process is lateral inhibition via the Notch signaling pathway (4, 33). This counteracts proneural gene upregulation via the autoregulatory enhancers in non-SOP cells through the inhibitory Enhancer of split (E[SPL]) bHLH proteins.

Another factor affecting proneural activity is the Zn finger transcription factor, Senseless (SENS). SENS belongs to the GPS (Gfi1/Pag-3/Senseless) family of proteins (30). This factor is crucial for the production of mature SOPs (47, 53). In *sens* mutants, SOPs begin to form but fail to complete specification, instead undergoing apoptosis (47). SENS’s role in promoting neurogenesis appears to be closely involved with modulating proneural factor activity. Without SENS the SOPS fail to maintain proneural protein levels required for formation and survival (47, 53). *sens* is a direct proneural target gene (29), and subsequently SENS protein is coexpressed with proneural proteins in SOPs (29, 70). In this context, SENS enhances proneural factor activity as a transcriptional coactivator: it can form complexes with AC/DA and SC/DA that greatly enhance their ability to stimulate gene expression via E-box binding sites (3, 29, 49). Although originally shown for AC and SC (3), the same coactivation synergy can also be observed for ATO/DA/SENS and AMOS/DA/SENS (49) and so appears to be a general mechanism of proneural factor modulation. Proneural/SENS synergy is thought to have an important role in bypassing the negative regulatory effects of Notch signaling in the SOP.

In addition to this coactivator activity, SENS can act as a direct transcriptional repressor. This is mediated by SENS binding directly to an S-box motif (29, 43). In this manner, SENS represses the *rhomboid* (*rho*) gene in embryonic abdominal segments (65). Interestingly, repression via an S box has also been shown for the *ac* autoregulatory enhancer (29). Thus, SENS can both repress and promote *ac* transcription: binding to the S box directly inhibits proneural autoregulation, whereas binding to proneural factors promotes autoregulation via the E box (15, 29). This contradictory function led to the proposal that SENS acts as a binary switch to promote either proneural protein activation or proneural gene repression under different circumstances (Fig. 1A and B) (29). In this model, manipulation of SENS activity could have a profound effect on proneural function and SOP formation, but it is unclear how the switch between activating and repressing modes of SENS action might be regulated. The initial suggestion was that it depends on the level of SENS expression, such that low levels are repressive (in ectodermal cells that will not become SOPs) while coactivation is triggered only at higher expression levels (in SOPs) (29). In this paper we address the possibility that posttranslational modification might influence SENS’s function. Specifically, we present evidence that modification by small ubiquitin-related modifier (SUMO) protein promotes SENS’s coactivator activity.
SUMO proteins are ubiquitin-like proteins that can become conjugated to lysine residues in target proteins (27, 28). SUMO enhances the transcriptional synergy between SENS and proneural proteins in S2 cells. (A, B) Schematic illustration of the binary switch (bars 2 and 4 versus 1 and 3, respectively). In the absence of SENS, ULP1 has no effect on transcriptional activation (bars 6 to 9 compared with bar 5). The ATG start codon and TGA stop (TCA on reverse strand) are in bold: Sens forward, CAGTGTGGC CCT; Sens reverse, GCGCTGGAA; (ii) K249R forward, GTGCGAAAGTTC AGG GCCG, and reverse, GCGGCTGCTCGCTCAGTCAAGTGC; (iv) K610R forward, GTGTGCCTG GCCACAATA; (v) K476R forward, GTGTGCCTG GCCACAATA; (vi) K420R forward, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTCAC. (E) The ULP1 SUMO protase (black bars) promotes a dose-dependent decrease in transcriptional synergy of the ternary ATO/DA/SENS complex (bars 6 to 9 compared with bar 5). In the absence of SENS, ULP1 has no effect on transcriptional activation (bars 2 and 4 versus 1 and 3, respectively).

SUMO proteins are ubiquitin-like proteins that can become conjugated to lysine residues in target proteins (27, 28). SUMO and ubiquitin have similar structures, and their conjugation mechanisms are remarkably similar. However, the function of SUMOylation is quite distinct from that of ubiquitination. SUMO targets are mostly high-molecular-weight nuclear proteins, and SUMOylation alters their cellular function in a variety of ways, including prevention of degradation by way of competing for ubiquitination sites (26), alteration of subcellular localization (9), modulation of protein stability (6), and modification of transcription factor activity (19, 21, 62). SUMO modification consequently has an important role in a large variety of biological processes.

Here we present data from in vivo and tissue culture experiments consistent with a role for SUMOylation in promoting the proneural/SENS synergy in Drosophila. In an S2 cell luciferase assay, transcriptional activation synergy between SENS and the proneural proteins SC and ATO was increased by enhancing SUMOylation and decreased by deSUMOylation. Consistent with a direct role for SUMO, SENS is SUMO-modified in Drosophila S2 cells and in an in vitro SUMOylation assay, and SENS with a mutated SUMOylation motif was refractory to SUMO stimulation. An in vivo misexpression assay revealed genetic interactions between SUMO and SENS, as well as with the proneural proteins themselves, that were dependent on the presence of a SUMOylation motif. We propose that SUMOylation of SENS via lysine 509 (K509) promotes its synergistic interaction with proneural proteins, thereby regulating their activity, and hence regulating an important step in neurogenesis.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Fly stocks.** Fly stocks used as previously described are 109(2)68gal4/CyO (31), UAS-ato (32), UAS-sc (13), and UAS-sens (47). UAS-FLAG-sumo/CyO flies were a kind gift from Minghua Nie and Albert Courey. UAS-sens-attB lines for wild-type and mutated SENS were made as described below.

**Plasmid constructs.** Protein expression constructs RactHAdh, RactH-Adh-da, and pAc-sc were donated by Christos Delidakis (29). pAc-sens for expression in the S2 cell cotransfection assay was a kind gift from Hamed Jafar-Nejad (29). pAc-FLAG-sens for expression of SENS with an N-terminal FLAG tag was made by inserting the following oligonucleotide in the Asp718 sequence preceding the ATG in pAc-sens: FLAG tag, GGA CAAAATGGAGCTACAAGGACGAGTACAGACGAG, and FLAG bottom, GTACGCTGTATGCTGTATGTGCTATTGTG.

The SENS coding sequence was cloned in the mammalian expression vector pEGFP-C1 (Clontech) for transfection in HeLa cells and expression of a GFP-SENS fusion protein. The following primers were used to amplify the sens sequence by PCR using pAc-sens as the template. The restriction sites for Sall and Xmal used in cloning are underlined, and the ATG start codon and TGA stop (TCA on reverse strand) are in bold: Sens forward, ACCGGTCGACATGAGATCC; (ii) K229R forward, GAACTGCACTGCAAGGTG; (iii) K233, K237, K241, and K245 forward, AGGTGACTGCTGCTGCGACG; (iv) K259R forward, GCTATGAAGCTTCAAG, and reverse, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC; (v) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (vi) K476R forward, GTGTGCCTG GCCACAATA; (vii) D511A forward, CAGCGCAAGGTGCAGTACCCAGGCGTACGAG, and reverse, GCCGCCGTA; (viii) K91R forward, ATGACCCCC GCCACAATA; (ix) K509R forward, AGTGGTATGGC CCT; (x) K448R forward, TATTGTGGC AGGGTACGTGCAACTTTC GGCAC; (xi) K133R forward, GCACCTTGAGCTGAGGAGGCAGCGGCG, and reverse, GGGCGTCGCGCTGCTGCCTGCGTAACTG TCAAGTGC; (xii) K420R forward, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC; (xiv) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (xv) K249R forward, ACCGGTCGACATGAGATCC; (xvi) K229R forward, GAACTGCACTGCAAGGTG; (xvii) K233, K237, K241, and K245 forward, AGGTGACTGCTGCTGCGACG; (xviii) K259R forward, GCTATGAAGCTTCAAG, and reverse, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC; (xix) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (xx) K249R forward, ACCGGTCGACATGAGATCC; (xxi) K229R forward, GAACTGCACTGCAAGGTG; (xxii) K233, K237, K241, and K245 forward, AGGTGACTGCTGCTGCGACG; (xxiii) K259R forward, GCTATGAAGCTTCAAG, and reverse, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC.

Site-directed mutagenesis of lysine to arginine for the predicted SUMOylation motifs in SENS p-EGFP-C1-sens (see Table 2) was carried out using the QuickChange mutagenesis kit from Agilent Technologies and the primers below, except for K533R, which was PCR amplified as a linear fragment with the mutation in the 3’ primer. Primers (with the codon encoding arginine indicated in boldface) included (i) K229R forward, TACGCGCTGAGGAGGAGGAG, and reverse, CTGCTCTCATCCTCAAGGCGGTA; (ii) K249R forward, GTGGGAAAGTGCAGGATGGC AGAAGCTG, and reverse, GCGATGTGGCCTGATCAGTCAAGTGC; (iii) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (iv) K476R forward, GTGTGCCTG GCCACAATA; (v) K420R forward, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC; (vi) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (vii) D511A forward, CAGCGCAAGGTGCAGTACCCAGGCGTACGAG, and reverse, GCCGCCGTA; (viii) K91R forward, ATGACCCCC GCCACAATA; (ix) K509R forward, AGTGGTATGGC CCT; (x) K448R forward, TATTGTGGC AGGGTACGTGCAACTTTC GGCAC; (xi) K133R forward, GCACCTTGAGCTGAGGAGGCAGCGGCG, and reverse, GGGCGTCGCGCTGCTGCCTGCGTAACTG TCAAGTGC; (xii) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (xiii) K249R forward, ACCGGTCGACATGAGATCC; (xiv) K229R forward, GAACTGCACTGCAAGGTG; (xv) K233, K237, K241, and K245 forward, AGGTGACTGCTGCTGCGACG; (xvi) K259R forward, GCTATGAAGCTTCAAG, and reverse, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC; (xvii) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (xviii) K249R forward, ACCGGTCGACATGAGATCC; (xix) K229R forward, GAACTGCACTGCAAGGTG; (xx) K233, K237, K241, and K245 forward, AGGTGACTGCTGCTGCGACG; (xxi) K259R forward, GCTATGAAGCTTCAAG, and reverse, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC; (xxii) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (xxiii) K249R forward, ACCGGTCGACATGAGATCC; (xxiv) K229R forward, GAACTGCACTGCAAGGTG; (xxv) K233, K237, K241, and K245 forward, AGGTGACTGCTGCTGCGACG; (xxvi) K259R forward, GCTATGAAGCTTCAAG, and reverse, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC; (xxvii) K327R forward, CATCGCATC GCCACAATA; (xxviii) K249R forward, ACCGGTCGACATGAGATCC; (xxix) K229R forward, GAACTGCACTGCAAGGTG; (xxx) K233, K237, K241, and K245 forward, AGGTGACTGCTGCTGCGACG; (xxxi) K259R forward, GCTATGAAGCTTCAAG, and reverse, CTGGCTGCTGCTGCTGCTAGTCAAGTGC.

The RKVD SUMO motif at amino acids 510 to 512 within the SENS sequence of pAc-FLAG-sens was mutated to give SENSK509R and
SUMOylation of Senseless Promotes Proneural Activity

SUMOylation refers to the covalent modification of proteins by the small ubiquitin-like modifier SUMO (small ubiquitin-related modifier). This post-translational modification is catalyzed by a family of SUMO-activating enzymes (E1), SUMO-conjugating enzymes (E2), and SUMO-activated enzymes (E3). SUMOylation can alter the stability, localization, and function of proteins, thereby modulating various cellular processes.

In the context of the document, SUMOylation is discussed in relation to the proneural gene Senseless (SENS) in Drosophila melanogaster. Senseless promotes the proneural activity of a complex of proneural genes, which are involved in the differentiation of neuronal and glial cells during early embryogenesis.

The text describes experiments where Senseless proteins were modified with SUMO using the phiC31 integrase system to insert SENS plasmids into an attP2 landing site on chromosome 3L. Insertion at the same landing site using the phiC31 integrase was a kind gift from J. Bischof. The constructs included pPAC-HA-Ubc9, pPAC-HA-Smt3, pPac-HA-DmSAE1, and GGATGGCCACTTTCAATAGGAG, and Ac reverse, GCGCAAGCTTCG cloned in pGL4-

**S2 cell cotransfection luciferase assays.** S2 cells were cotransfected with plasmids containing reporter constructs and expression plasmids for the relevant proteins. Luciferase assays were used to measure transcriptional activity.

**In vitro SUMO conjugation assays.** In vitro SUMO conjugation assays were carried out according to the method described in reference 12 for N-terminally glutathione S-transferase (GST)-tagged 20-amino-acid SUMO fragments. The reaction mixture contained 0.5 μg GST, 2 μg GST-SENS-f, 0.1 μg recombinant GST-Ubc9 (E2), and 10 μl ATP regenerating system (50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5, 5 mM MgCl2, 2 mM ATP, 10 mM inorganic phosphate, 3.5 U/ml creatine kinase, 3.5 U/ml inorganic pyrophosphatase). After incubation at 37°C for 3 h, the mixture was stopped by adding sample buffer, boiled, and then separated by 12.5% SDS-PAGE, and SUMOylation substrates and conjugates were visualized by blotting with rabbit anti-GST antibodies. The SUMOylation conjugates were confirmed by blotting the stripped membranes with rabbit anti-His antibodies.

**RESULTS**

SUMO promotes transcriptional activation by the proneural/SSENS ternary complex in S2 cells. The E-box-dependent transcriptional activation synergy between proneural proteins and SENS can be observed in an S2 cell luciferase reporter gene assay using both a construct based on an autoregulatory enhancer from the ace gene (pAc-luc) and concatemerized E-box reporter constructs (sc-luc and ato-luc) (Fig. 1). At low plasmid levels, transcription of either ATO/DA or SC/DA does not result in significant activation of the concatemerized E-box luciferase reporter constructs (Fig. 1C and D, column 3). SENS transfected alone has no effect on transcriptional activation, even at high concentra-
tions (49). However, cotransfection of SENS and proneural/DA results in significant activation (49) (Fig. 1C and D; compare bars 5 and 3 in each panel). This effect is thought to occur via the formation of a ternary proneural/SENS complex. It is E-box dependent but does not require the DNA-binding ability of SENS (3, 29, 49) (Fig. 1). It has previously been shown that Drosophila SUMO substrates can be SUMO modified in S2 cells both by endogenous SUMO and by SUMO expressed from a cotransfected expression construct (9). We therefore used this assay to test the effect of SUMO components on proneural/SENS activity.

When constructs expressing components of the SUMOylation pathway (UBC9 [the SUMO conjugating enzyme] and Smt3 [SUMO]) are transfected into S2 cells, there is a strong downregulation of background reporter gene activity (Fig. 1C and D; see bar 2 in each panel), which is perhaps consistent with SUMO’s general role in repression of transcription; for example, by histone deacetylase (HDAC) recruitment (18). This general repressive effect of SUMOylation is still evident in the presence of SC/DA or ATO/DA (Fig. 1C and D; bar 4 compared to bar 3 in each case). In contrast, however, SUMO promotes a dramatic increase in SC/DA/SENS and ATO/DA/SENS activation of reporter genes (Fig. 1C and D, bar 6 versus bar 5). This observation is consistent with a role for SUMOylation in specifically promoting the formation, function, or stability of the proneural/SENS complex.

SUMO modification is a transient process, and the SUMO moiety can be removed from a modified protein by SUMO proteases. In common with yeast and mammals, the Ulp1 cysteine protease performs de-SUMOylation in Drosophila (8, 57). In the reporter gene assay, cotransfection with increasing amounts of Ulp1—expressing plasmid caused a corresponding decrease in ATO/DA/SENS-dependent reporter gene activation for $\alpha$-luc (Fig. 1E), $sc$-luc, and $acp$-luc (data not shown). This occurred in the absence of cotransfected SUMO/UBC9, consistent with an effect via endogenous SUMO pathway components within the S2 cells. We conclude that proneural/SENS activity is enhanced by SUMOylation, and indeed it is largely dependent on endogenous SUMO activity in S2 cells. Furthermore, the effect of SUMOylation is seen only in the presence of SENS, consistent with SENS being the target of SUMOylation.

SENS interacts with SUMO in a yeast two-hybrid assay and is SUMOylated in S2 cells. The effect of SUMO in the S2 reporter assay suggests an effect via SENS itself. For other SUMO substrates, such as the chromosomal passenger complex protein, Borealin, and the Daxx transcriptional repressor, interaction with SUMO has been demonstrated by a yeast two-hybrid assay (12, 36), so we used the same approach to test whether SENS and SUMO interact. First, we tested the interaction of SENS with the activated form of SUMO (SUMO$^{AC}$), which lacks the two C-terminal amino acids of full-length SUMO revealing the C-terminal diglycine (12). Our yeast two-hybrid results indicated a clear interaction between SENS and SUMO$^{AC}$, supporting the possibility that SENS is a substrate for SUMOylation.

We next used the yeast two-hybrid assay to determine whether SENS also interacts with a nonconjugatable form of SUMO (SUMO$^{AGG}$) that lacks 6 C-terminal amino acids including the C-terminal diglycine (37). An interaction was indeed observed between SENS and SUMO$^{AGG}$ (Table 1), suggesting noncovalent interaction between the two, but this was weaker than that observed with SUMO$^{AC}$. One possible reason for the weaker interaction with SUMO$^{AGG}$ is that, in contrast to SUMO$^{AC}$, the non-conjugatable form has a mostly cytoplasmic rather than nuclear location (12). In addition to covalent modification, many SUMO substrates also interact noncovalently with SUMO via hydrophobic regions, and such interactions have been found to be important for subsequent covalent modification (44, 58). The interaction of SENS with both SUMO$^{AC}$ and SUMO$^{AGG}$ therefore implies that SENS is a strong candidate for SUMO modification.

In order to investigate whether SENS is covalently modified by SUMO, we transfected Drosophila S2 cells with a FLAG-tagged SENS expression construct and various combinations of plasmids expressing components of the SUMOylation machinery. Western blotting with an anti-FLAG antibody was then used to analyze the lysates (Fig. 2A and B). FLAG-SENS was detected as a strong band migrating at 100 kDa (Fig. 2A, arrow). An additional molecular-weight band (Fig. 2A, asterisk) was observed. This band was strongly dependent on the presence of the SUMO protease inhibitor, N-ethylmaleimide (NEM) (Fig. 2B). Moreover, it disappeared upon cotransfection with the SUMO protease ULP1 (Fig. 2A, lane 5). Hence, we conclude that the extra band represents SUMOylated SENS protein. Interestingly, the additional band could be observed both in the presence of exogenous SUMO and/or Ubc9 and with SENS alone, consistent with the conclusion above stating that SENS activity is modified by endogenous SUMOylation activity. Additional higher-molecular-weight bands may correspond to minor species with more than one lysine SUMOylated (14).

In HeLa cells SENS localizes to PML bodies in a SUMO-dependent manner. To look for further evidence of an interaction between SENS and SUMO, we analyzed their subcellular distribution in cultured cells. In mammalian cells, SUMO is localized to punctate subnuclear structures called promyelocytic leukemia protein (PML) nuclear bodies. Interaction between transcription factors and SUMO are capable of interacting.

We used GFP-tagged SENS and human RFP-SUMO-1 and RFP-SUMO-2 to test whether SENS and SUMO colocalize in HeLa cells (Fig. 3). Human SUMO-1 and SUMO-2 show 52% and 71% identity, respectively, to Drosophila SUMO (52). SUMO-1 or SUMO-2 localized to the PML bodies of the cell, as shown by costaining with PML antibody (results not shown) (68). When GFP-SENS was transfected alone, it localized to the nucleus in a

TABLE 1 Yeast two-hybrid results demonstrating interactions between SENS and SUMO$^{a, b}$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protein</th>
<th>BD-vector</th>
<th>BD-SUMO$^{AC}$</th>
<th>BD-SUMO$^{AGG}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>+ + +</td>
<td>ND</td>
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<td>−</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD-SENS$^{K509R}$</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD-SENS$^{1141A}$</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>+ + +</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{a}$The interactions were confirmed by the presence of colonies on SC-Leu-Trp-His selective plates (HIS reporter gene) and also by positive β-galactosidase assays. AD and BD, GAL4 activation and DNA-binding domains, respectively, in the yeast two-hybrid prey and bait constructs; ND, not done.

$^{b}$ Positive control.
diffuse pattern excluding the nucleoli (Fig. 3A). When GFP-SENS and RFP-SUMO-1 or 2 were cotransfected, the SENS protein became dramatically redistributed so that it colocalized with the SUMO in the PML bodies (Fig. 3B and C). This is consistent with a direct interaction between SENS and SUMO in HeLa cells.

**Lysine at position 509 is important for SUMO-dependent SENS relocalization in HeLa cells.** As the HeLa cell results are consistent with a direct interaction between SUMO and SENS, we investigated the effects of mutating potential SUMO target lysines on the localization of SENS. Typically SUMO is conjugated to lysine residues in the consensus sequence ΨKxD/E (where Ψ is a large hydrophobic residue and x is any residue) (51), although not all such motifs will be SUMOylated and nonconsensus SUMOylation sites are also known (27). Analysis of the SENS sequence using SUMOplot (Abgent) identified 11 potential sites for SUMO modification, five of which are predicted with high probability (Fig. 3D). We investigated the importance of these motifs in the HeLa cell localization assay. Lysines in the predicted SUMO target sequences were mutated to arginine to prevent SUMO conjugation, either individually or in combination (Table 2), and the subnuclear localization in HeLa cells was determined for each of these mutants. This showed that up to 8 of the 11 motifs could be mutated in combination (SENS-m8 construct; Fig. 4B) with no disruption of the localization of the SENS protein and no change in its relocalization with SUMO upon cotransfection (Fig. 4A and C). In contrast, mutation of one additional lysine (K509) resulted in disruption of the subnuclear localization (construct SENS-m9; Fig. 4E). Sens-m9 transfected alone was seen in nuclear dots, distinct from the PML bodies (Fig. 4D), rather than in the diffuse pattern seen for wild-type protein. Moreover, SENS-m9 did not relocate to PML bodies upon SUMO cotransfection (Fig. 4F). We then examined the effect of mutating K509 alone. Mutation

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**FIG 2** SENS is SUMOylated in S2 cells. (A and B) Western blots with anti-FLAG antibody of S2 cell lysates after transfection with plasmids for FLAG-SENS, SUMO, ULP1, or UBC9 as indicated. (A) Anti-FLAG antibody detects unmodified FLAG-SENS (arrow) and an additional lower-mobility band proposed to be SUMOylated SENS (asterisk). This SUMO-SENS band is observed when SENS is transfected alone (lane 1) or is cotransfected with plasmids expressing SUMO (lane 2), UBC9 (lane 3), or both SUMO and UBC9 (lane 4), but it is absent when the SUMO protease Ulp1 is cotransfected (lane 5). The presence of the SUMO-SENS band in the absence of cotransfected SUMO (lane 1) suggests SENS modification by endogenous SUMO. (B) The SUMO-SENS band is dependent on the presence of the SUMO protease inhibitor, NEM, in the lysates (lane 2 compared to lane 1). Note that NEM is present in all lysates in panel A. (C) Western blot with anti-FLAG antibody of S2 cell lysates after transfection with plasmids for FLAG-SENSD511A, SUMO, ULP1, or UBC9 as indicated. SUMOylated SENS (asterisk) was detected as for the wild-type protein.

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**SUMOylation of Senseless Promotes Proneural Activity**

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of K509 (the SENSK509R mutant construct) resulted in alteration of the subnuclear localization of SENS in a proportion (59.3% ± 2.7%) of the transfected cells (Fig. 4G and H). In addition, SENSK509R failed to colocalize with SUMO in most cells (Fig. 4I and J; no colocalization in 95.3% of cells). We conclude that K509 is important for SUMO-dependent localization of SENS and may be a major site of SUMOylation, although other sites may contribute as well.

As lysine residues can be subject to various posttranslational modifications, including acetylation and ubiquitination, we confirmed a SUMO-specific effect of K509 by mutating the third residue in the SUMOylation motif to give SENSD511A. The third residue is specific for UBC9 interactions and would not affect other modifications of the lysine residue in the motif (45). SENSD511A failed to colocalize with SUMO in all cells (data not shown), consistent with mutation of the motif disrupting a covalent interaction with SUMO.

In contrast with the colocalization assay results, both SENSD511A and SENSK509R retained the ability to interact with SUMO in the yeast two-hybrid assay (Table 1) consistent with the presence of additional SUMO target lysines. For both SENSD511A and SENSK509R, interaction with SUMOACT was, however, weaker than for wild-type SENS, consistent with an important role for this SENS SUMOylation motif in the SUMO-SENS interaction.

SENS SUMOylation mutants are refractory to SUMO modification in vitro but not in S2 cells, suggesting SUMOylation at an alternative site or sites in S2 cells. In order to test the ability of the putative SUMO acceptor K509 to be SUMOylated, we used an in vitro SUMOylation assay (12, 60). GST-tagged 20-amino-acid peptides containing the K509 SUMO motif and surrounding amino acids were used to assess the efficiency of SUMOylation of wild-type, K509R, and D511A versions of the motif. In this assay only the wild-type sequence was SUMO modified, demonstrating that K509 is indeed an acceptor for SUMOylation and that both mutations prevent this SUMOylation (Fig. 5A and B).

We then tested the effects of the mutations in the context of full-length SENS in S2 lysates. In this case SUMO-modified SENS was still seen for both SENSD511A (Fig. 2C) and SENSK509R (data not shown). We suggest that this may arise due to SUMOylation at one or more alternative lysines in the SENS sequence, as has been

TABLE 2 Summary of the SENS SUMO motif mutations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutant name</th>
<th>Lysine(s) mutated</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>K327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>K229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>K533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>K249</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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SUMOylation of Senseless Promotes Proneural Activity

FIG 4 Mutation of SUMOylation motifs in SENS reveals K309 is important for SUMO-dependent SENS relocalization in HeLa cells. (A to C) Mutation of 8 of the 11 SUMOylation motifs in SENS (SENS-m8 in schematic [B]) had no effect on its localization. (A) SENS-m8 showed a diffuse nuclear distribution similar to that of wild-type SENS (Fig. 3) (C) In the presence of SUMO-1, SENS-m8 relocalized to the PML bodies in a fashion similar to that of wild-type SENS. (D to F) Mutation of one extra lysine (K509R) in SENS-m9 (schematic [E]) affected SUMO-dependent relocalization. (D) SENS-m9 showed punctate nuclear distribution, which does not appear to correspond to the PML bodies. (F) In the presence of SUMO-1 the SENS-m9 protein remained in a wider distribution pattern than was seen for SUMO-1. (G and H) The single-site mutant SENSK509R showed two different patterns of distribution in the absence of SUMO. The first pattern (G) was indistinguishable from that of the wild type (compare with Fig. 3A; found in 40.8% ± 2.7% of transfected cells), while the second (H) showed the SENSK509R localized in dots, unlike the pattern seen for the wild type but more diffuse than for SENS-m9 (59.3% ± 2.7% of transfected cells). (I and J) Upon cotransfection with SUMO-1, relocalization of SENSK509R occurred in a small proportion of cells (data not shown; 4.7% ± 1.2% of cells), while in most cells localization was defective, i.e., diffuse with nuclear dots, 53.9% ± 1.7% of transfected cells (I); and diffuse localization, 41.3% ± 0.7% of transfected cells (J).

In each case the letter alone shows the GFP-SENS variant (green); a letter followed by one prime shows the RFP-SUMO-1 (red), a letter followed by a double prime shows red/green overlay; and a letter followed by a triple prime labels the red/green/blue overlay (blue, DAPI [4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole]), except in those cases where SENS variants are transfected alone, and then the triple prime indicates DAPI alone.

seen for other SUMO substrates subject to SUMOylation at unidentified sites (14, 54). The presence of alternative SUMOylation sites is also supported by the yeast two-hybrid interaction data. However, the strong effect of K509 motif mutations on SENS colocalization with SUMO in HeLa cells suggests that this site may be of major importance in vivo.

SENS SUMOylation mutants are refractory to SUMO stimulation of proneural/SENS transcriptional activation. We tested
the effect of the K509R and D511A SUMO motif mutations on proneural/SENS activity in the S2 cell reporter gene assay (Fig. 6). In contrast to wild-type SENS, the activities of both mutated versions were unresponsive to UBC9/SUMO cotransfection (Fig. 6B, bars 8 and 10 compared to bar 6). These data are consistent with K509 being an important SUMOylation site. Furthermore, they suggest that SUMO modification of SENS at K509 promotes proneural/SENS synergy. Our next step was to assess whether SUMOylation of SENS is important in vivo.

**Overexpression of SUMO enhances proneural/SENS-induced neurogenesis in vivo.** In *Drosophila*, ectopic expression of proneural proteins or SENS induces the formation of supernumerary sensory organs (31, 47). To assess whether SUMOylation of SENS plays a role in vivo, we targeted the expression of SENS and SC in the wing imaginal disc, using an SOP/PNC GAL4 driver [109(2)68Gal4]. Misexpression of SENS in wing imaginal discs using 109(68)Gal4 results in ectopic external sense organ (bristle) production due to the specification of supernumerary SOPs (Fig. 7A). Misexpression of SUMO using the same Gal4 driver did not affect bristle number (Fig. 7A). However, SUMO misexpression was able to enhance the bristle number increase due to SENS misexpression (Fig. 7A). Interestingly, SUMO misexpression also enhanced the ability of proneural proteins to promote ectopic sense organs. SUMO enhanced the production of ectopic bristles in response to SC misexpression (Fig. 7B). We suggest that the effect of SUMO on SC function occurs via modification of endogenous SENS. Significantly, SUMO also enhances the effect of ATO misexpression (Fig. 7C). ATO misexpression results in a reduction in bristle number due to respecification of the SOPs to give internal chordotonal sense organs (31). Simultaneous misexpression of SUMO enhanced this reduction by ATO. This suggests that SUMO does not promote bristle formation per se but instead promotes neurogenesis via a specific effect on proneural/SENS activity. It is notable that SUMO overexpression alone has no effect on endogenous neurogenesis, suggesting that
SUMO becomes limiting only under the circumstances of proneural/SENS misexpression.

The effect of the SUMOylation motif mutants on SENS’s promotion of ectopic bristles was assessed. Transgenic lines were constructed with SENS misexpression constructs inserted into an attP2 landing site on chromosome 3L (10). Insertion at the same landing site allowed quantitative comparison of their effects on neurogenesis (Fig. 8A and B). The 109(2)68Gal4 line was used to drive ectopic expression of SENS or SENS variants (SENSK509R and SENSD511A) (Fig. 8A). The two mutated SENS proteins promoted significantly lower numbers of ectopic bristles than did wild-type protein. The effects of the mutations on the in vivo interaction between SUMO and SENS were also assessed (Fig. 8B).

In this experiment we exploited the temperature dependence of SUMOylation of Senseless Promotes Proneural Activity

![FIG 6](image6.png)  
**FIG 6** SUMOylation motif mutants are refractory to SUMO stimulation. Transcriptional activation of the ac enhancer reporter gene construct pGL4-AcE-luc by SC/DA heterodimer is slightly elevated by addition of wild-type SENS (column 5 versus column 3). This SENS/SC/DA interaction is strongly and specifically elevated upon coexpression of SUMO and UBC9 results (column 6 versus column 5). In contrast, the SUMO motif mutants SENSK509R and SENSD511A were unresponsive to the addition of SUMO and UBC9 (columns 8 versus 7 and 10 versus 9).

DISCUSSION
SUMO enhances SENS’s ability to promote proneural activity in reporter gene assays and to promote neurogenesis in vivo. Our data suggest that SUMO modification promotes proneural gene autoregulation and is also likely to be important in the regulation of downstream proneural target genes. SUMOylation has a positive effect and deSUMOylation a negative effect on transcriptional activation by proneural/DA/SENS ternary complexes in S2 cells. In contrast, no effect on proneural protein activity was observed in the absence of SENS, suggesting that SENS is the target for SUMO. This is supported by the interactions between SUMO and SENS in the HeLa cell relocalization and yeast two-hybrid assays, the direct covalent interaction between SENS and SUMO detected in S2 cells.

The last assay identified a lysine (K509) in the fourth Zn finger as a candidate for a major SUMOylation site in the SENS sequence. Mutation of this lysine to arginine (K509R) resulted in disruption of SUMO-dependent SENS interaction in the HeLa cell assay, a SENS protein refractory to SUMO stimulation in the S2 cell transcriptional assay, and reduced genetic interaction between SENS and SUMO in vivo. Furthermore, evidence from yeast two-hybrid assays and from analysis of 2 S lysates for SENS (K509R) suggested that additional unidentified lysines may also be SUMOylated. Interestingly, the basal transcriptional synergy between SENS and proneural/DA heterodimers observed in S2 cells appears to be largely dependent on endogenous SUMOylation, as the synergy is strongly reduced by ULP1 cotransfection. Consistent with this, proteomic analysis has shown that S2 cells express SUMO, UBC9, and UBA2 (SAE1) proteins.

SUMO affects the activity of the proneural/DA/SENS ternary complex. While our evidence suggests that SENS is the target of SUMOylation, we do not rule out the possibility that the other proteins of the complex may also be SUMOylated, but at present there is no evidence for this. Notably, the ATO sequence has no \( \Psi KxX/E \) motifs, while SC has been shown to be unaffected by SUMOylation in a separate study (1). DA has three potential SUMOylation motifs, but mutation of each of these does not affect proneural/DA/SENS synergy (our unpublished observations).

Our evidence suggests that SUMOylation of SENS enhances transcriptional synergy via an effect on the proneural/SENS ternary complex itself. How might SENS SUMOylation mediate this increase in transcriptional synergy? SUMOylation can exert a positive effect on transcriptional activation by various mechanisms including alteration of subcellular localization and mediation of interaction with transcriptional coactivators or DNA (40, 61, 64). In the present case, we suggest that either (i) SUMOylation increases the affinity of SENS for the proneural protein heterodimer, hence favoring formation of the more transcriptionally active ternary complex; (ii) SUMOylation increases the transcriptional activation or DNA-binding ability of the ternary complex, perhaps by inducing a conformational change; or (iii) SUMO simply stabilizes SENS. SUMO is known to modulate protein-protein interactions in other systems: for example, SUMOylation of RanGAP1 promotes binding of RanB2 either by creating or exposing a binding site (46), while nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) studies have provided direct evidence of a SUMOylation-induced conformational change in thymine-DNA glycosylase (56). The identified SUMO site of SENS (K509) is within the fourth Zn finger. This is significant because the Zn finger has been shown to be unimportant for DNA binding by SENS but contributes to the transcriptional synergy mediated by proneural/SENS interaction (3). It is conceivable therefore that SUMOylation at this site increases the affinity of SENS for proneural/Da heterodimers. This would be similar to the proposed enhanced interaction between the TEA family transcription factor Scalloped and its coactivator Vestigial upon SUMOylation of the latter (59).

A major effect of SENS (and therefore SUMO) in promoting SOP specification appears to be via promoting proneural/DA activation of autoregulatory enhancers. This proneural/SENS autoregulatory synergy is thought to have an important role in bypassing the negative regulatory effects of the Hairy/E(SPL) (HES) bHLH repressor proteins downstream of Notch signaling (29). It is therefore interesting that another role for SUMOylation in SOP specification has recently been identified in relation to HES repressors. A model has been proposed in which the repressive activity of HES proteins during neurogenesis (as well as segmentation and sex determination) is disrupted by the SUMO-targeted ubiquitin ligase (STUB1) Degrin dolade (DGRN) (1, 2, 5). DGRN binds to SUMOylated Groucho (GRO), the corepressor of HES. This interaction, as well as ubiquitination of the HES proteins, is thought to disrupt the HES-GRO interaction, leading to increased neurogenesis. Hence, these two SUMO-dependent mechanisms (i.e., increased SENS coactivation and decreased HES repression) may work in a complementary manner to enhance neurogenesis (Fig. 9). It will be important to determine how SOP-specific SUMOylation is regulated in order to elucidate the developmental mechanisms involved.

As well as acting as a proneural coactivator, SENS directly represses some target genes via binding to S box motifs. It is therefore conceivable that SUMO can relieve SENS repression of its targets by its promotion of ternary proneural-SENS formation, effectively sequestering SENS from binding to its target S boxes. For example, SENS directly represses the SOP-specific gene rho-mob (rho), the activation of which is crucial for the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR)-dependent recruitment of secondary SOPs during neurogenesis (25, 39, 65, 69). ATO indirectly activates rho expression in larval abdominal SOPs by binding SENS and preventing it from binding and repressing the rho enhancer (65). If, for example, SUMOylation enhances SENS binding to ATO, then it may play a role in activation of rho and other direct targets of SENS repression.

SENS belongs to the GPS (Gfi1/Pag-3/SENS) family of proteins (30), and its mammalian orthologues are the oncogenes Gfi1 and Gfi1b. The Gfi proteins differ from SENS in containing transcriptional repression SNAG domains near their N termini, and Gfi1 and Gfi1b have been reported to act mainly as transcriptional repressors (22, 71). Despite these differences, in the mammalian peripheral nervous system Gfi1 functions in close connection to proneural factors. For example, it works in concert with Atoh1 (the mammalian homologue of ATO) in the specification of inner

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**FIG 9** A model for the role of SUMO in SOP specification. This model combines our investigation of SENS with recent studies of HES-GROUCHO (1, 5).

(A) In the ectodermal cells adjacent to the SOP, SENS acts as a DNA-binding-dependent repressor of proneural gene autoactivation by proneural-DA heterodimers (bHLH) (29). An additional level of proneural gene repression results from E(SPL)-GROUCHO (HES-GRO) corepressor complexes binding to both SENS and the bHLH heterodimer (3). (B) In the SOP, SUMOylation of SENS promotes SENS-proneural transcriptional activation of proneural gene expression. Also in the SOP, SUMOylation of GRO promotes its binding by the ubiquitin ligase DGRN, an association that disrupts the association of GRO and E(SPL), leading to derepression (1, 5). The S-box is the SENS binding site and the E-box is the proneural-DA heterodimer binding site. In this panel the S-box is shown unoccupied, but it is not known whether SUMOylation of SENS prevents its DNA binding.
ear hair cells (35, 48, 63, 67). Gfi1 also has a crucial role in the formation of retinal ganglion cells in the mammalian eye, working downstream of a different ATO homologue, Atoh7 (63, 66). Gfi1 also has key developmental roles in the lung and intestine, working together with the mammalian AC/SC homologue Ascl1 in pulmonary neuroendocrine cell production (34) and with Atoh1 in the production of secretory cells of the intestine (55).

It has been suggested that Gfi1 and the mammalian proneural proteins may act as transcriptional coactivators in a way similar to that of the Drosophila proteins (34, 55, 63), although direct evidence for this is lacking. If corroborated, such interactions could conceivably be modulated by SUMO in a mechanism similar to SUMOylation, and this could have an effect via a molecular mechanism similar to that which we have found in Drosophila. Interestingly, this is supported by the observation that, like SENS, Gfi1 associates with SUMO pathway proteins including the SUMO-conjugating enzyme UBC9 in a yeast two-hybrid assay (16), although no other evidence has so far been reported for SUMOylation of Gfi1. While SENS has four C-terminal zinc fingers, Gfi1 has six. The sixth zinc finger of Gfi1 is not needed for DNA binding and is equivalent to the fourth zinc finger of SENS. This is the location of the putative SUMOylated lysine (K509) in SENS, which is completely conserved in the context of the SUMOylation motif in zinc finger 6 of Gfi1. In conclusion, it is possible that Gfi1 activity is modulated by SUMOylation, and this could have an effect via a molecular mechanism similar to that which we have identified for SENS.

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