AGRI MAGAZINE
(International E-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)
Volume: 02, Issue: 10 (October, 2025)
Available online at http://www.agrimagazine.in

Heterosis and Combining Ability Analysis in Maize Hybrids Using Line × Tester Design

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Maize (*Zea mays L.*) is one of the most important cereal crops globally, serving as food, feed, and an industrial raw material. Enhancing productivity in maize is largely achieved through hybrid breeding, where heterosis (hybrid vigor) plays a central role. The exploitation of heterosis requires an understanding of the genetic potential of parental lines and their ability to combine favorably. Combining ability analysis, especially under the Line × Tester mating design proposed by Kempthorne (1957), is a widely used biometrical approach to evaluate genetic variance, parental contribution, and hybrid performance.

Heterosis in Maize

Heterosis refers to the superiority of F_1 hybrids over their parents in terms of yield, vigor, or other traits. In maize, heterosis manifests in traits such as:

- Grain yield per plant
- Ear length and girth
- Kernel row number and grain weight
- Early maturity and stress tolerance

The magnitude and direction of heterosis vary with genetic divergence, environment, and trait heritability. Quantification is generally done as:

- Mid-parent heterosis (MPH) = $(F_1 - MP)/MP \times 100$
- Better-parent heterosis (BPH) = $(F_1 - BP)/BP \times 100$
- Standard heterosis (SH) = $(F_1 - SC)/SC \times 100$

  Where MP = mid-parent mean, BP = better parent, SC = standard check.

Combining Ability: Concepts

Combining ability measures the potential of parental lines to transmit desirable genes to hybrids. It is of two types:

1. **General Combining Ability (GCA):**

- Average performance of a line across several crosses.
- Reflects additive gene effects and additive × additive interactions.

2. Specific Combining Ability (SCA):

- Performance of a line in specific crosses relative to its GCA.
- Indicates non-additive gene effects (dominance, epistasis).

In hybrid breeding, both GCA and SCA are crucial—high GCA parents are good sources of favorable alleles, while high SCA hybrids reflect strong non-additive interactions.

Line × Tester Design

The Line × Tester design is a factorial mating scheme used to evaluate the combining ability of a set of female lines (L) crossed with a set of male testers (T).

- Total hybrids = L × T
- Provides estimates of GCA effects of lines and testers, SCA effects of hybrids, and their relative importance.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) in Line × Tester

Partitioning of variance is done as:

- Replications
- Crosses (Lines, Testers, Line × Tester)
- Error

From mean squares, genetic variance components are estimated:

- σ^2GCA (additive variance)
- σ^2SCA (non-additive variance)
- Ratio σ^2GCA/σ^2SCA indicates the nature of gene action:

✓ 1 → additive effects predominate

✓ <1 → non-additive effects predominate

Advantages

- Simplicity in design and analysis
- Efficient evaluation of multiple lines against standard testers
- Provides parental selection criteria for hybrid and synthetic variety development

Application in Maize Breeding

Line × Tester analysis helps:

- Identify superior parental lines with high GCA for yield and related traits.
- Detect promising cross combinations with high SCA and heterosis.
- Understand genetic architecture of quantitative traits.
- Formulate breeding strategies:

✓ If additive variance dominates → selection breeding, recurrent selection.

✓ If non-additive variance dominates → hybrid breeding and heterosis exploitation.

Case Illustration (Generic Example)

Suppose 8 maize inbred lines are crossed with 3 testers, producing 24 hybrids. Evaluation across yield and yield-attributing traits may reveal:

- Lines L_3 and L_6 with significant positive GCA for grain yield.
- Tester T_2 showing good GCA for early maturity.
- Hybrid $L_6 \times T_2$ with high SCA for yield and standard heterosis over commercial check. This provides direct information on potential hybrid candidates and parental utility in breeding programs.

Conclusion

Heterosis and combining ability analysis through Line × Tester design are indispensable in maize breeding. The approach not only quantifies hybrid vigor but also dissects the genetic basis of yield and agronomic traits. By identifying superior parents and cross combinations, breeders can develop high-yielding, stable, and adaptable maize hybrids, thereby strengthening food security and profitability.