Merged Beams Studies for Astrobiology

Daniel Savin[*1], Aodh O'connor[1], Nathalie De Ruette[1], Kenneth Miller[1], Julia Stuetzel[1], and Xavier Urbain[2]

[1]Columbia University – Columbia University in the City of New York 2960 Broadway New York, NY 10027-6902 USA, États-Unis
[2]Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) – Place de l'Université 1 - 1348 Louvain-La-Neuve, Belgique

Résumé

The chain of chemical reactions leading towards life is thought to begin in molecular clouds when atomic C and O are fixed into molecules. Reactions of neutral C with H3+ is one of the first steps in the gas-phase chemistry leading to the formation of complex organic molecules. Water, believed to be essential for life, can form via a chain of gas-phase reactions that begin with neutral O reacting with H3+. Uncertainties in the rate coefficients for these reactions hinder our ability to understand the first links in the chemical chain leading towards life. Theory provides little insight as fully quantum mechanical calculations for reactions involving four or more atoms are beyond current capabilities. Experimental data are sparse due to the challenge of producing sufficiently intense and well-characterized beams of neutral atoms. We have developed a novel merged-beam apparatus to study reactions of neutral atoms with molecular ions at the low collision energies relevant for molecular clouds. Photo-detachment of keV-energy atomic anion beams is used to produce beams of neutral C and O. A velocity-matched H3+ beam is then merged with the neutrals. The merged-beams method allows us to achieve kinetic temperatures below 30 K. Using our results, we are able to generate thermal rate coefficients for use in chemical models of molecular clouds. We find significant discrepancies with the data currently used by astrochemists. Additionally, the standard three parameter fit used in astrochemical databases cannot reproduce the temperature dependence of our results, indicating that the databases need to adopt a new approach for reproducing reaction rate coefficients.

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[*]Intervenant