Orientation of surfactant molecules at a liquid-air interface measured by optical second-harmonic generation

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(Received 4 October 1984)

The average molecular orientation of a monolayer of sodium-dodecyl-napthalene-sulfonate on a water-air interface has been determined by use of optical second-harmonic generation. The molecular orientation is shown to vary smoothly with increasing surface density of the molecules.

Insoluble molecular monolayers at gas-liquid or liquid-liquid interfaces are interesting from a fundamental as well as a practical point of view. They are rather ideal for studies of the rich world of two-dimensional phase transitions1,2 and provide an insight to the understanding of surfactants, wetting, microemulsions, and membrane structures.3 In the interpretation of the observed properties of these systems, various assumptions about the molecular orientation are often made,1 but so far, few clear experimental data are available.

In this paper we present the first measurement of the molecular orientation of a monolayer of surfactant molecules at a water-air interface using the newly developed optical second-harmonic-generation (SHG) technique.4 The molecules under investigation are sodium-dodecyl-napthalene-sulfonate (SDNS) [CH₃(CH₂)₁₁-C₁₀H₆-SO₃Na, where C₁₀H₆ is a double benzene structure]. We found, along with the measurement of surface pressure versus surface molecular area indicating the absence of a transition between an expanded and a condensed liquid phase, the orientation of these surfactant molecules changing continuously as a function of the surface pressure, and approaching a limiting inclination angle ~30° for a saturated monolayer.

That optical SHG is an effective surface probe has been demonstrated recently in a number of cases.4–7 It is based on the idea that SHG is forbidden in centrosymmetric media but allowed at the interfaces where the inversion symmetry is necessarily broken. The surface nonlinear susceptibility, which is responsible for the SHG at an interface generally reflects the properties of the surface layer. If is a monolayer of molecular adsorbates, and takes the form

\[
\overline{X}_S^{(2)} = N_S \langle \overline{\alpha}^{(2)} \rangle ,
\]

(1)

where is the surface density of the molecules, and \(\langle \overline{\alpha}^{(2)} \rangle\) is the nonlinear polarizability averaged over the molecular orientational distribution, then a measurement of \(\overline{X}_S^{(2)}\) should enable us to obtain information about the orientation of the adsorbates. This is particularly true for rodlike molecules whose \(\overline{\alpha}^{(2)}\) is dominated by a single element \(\alpha^{(2)}_{111}\) along the molecular axis \(\hat{\xi}\). For example, when the orientational distribution of the molecules in the azimuthal plane is random, the nonvanishing components of \(\overline{X}_S^{(2)}\) can be written as

\[
\begin{align*}
\alpha^{(2)}_{11} & = N_S \langle \cos^2 \theta \rangle \alpha^{(2)}_{11} , \\
\alpha^{(2)}_{21} & = \alpha^{(2)}_{21} = \frac{1}{2} N_S \langle \cos \theta \sin \theta \rangle \alpha^{(2)}_{11} ,
\end{align*}
\]

(2)

where \(\theta\) is the angle between the molecular axis and the surface normal, and the subindices 1 and 2 refer to directions perpendicular and parallel to the surface, respectively. We see from Eq. (2) that a measurement of the ratio of any two linear combinations of \(\alpha^{(2)}_{11}\) and \(\alpha^{(2)}_{22}\) can yield a weighted average of \(\theta\). The average value or the most probable value of \(\theta\) can then be deduced by assuming a certain orientational distribution function.

We have applied this technique to the study of the orientation of a monolayer of SDNS molecules floating on a water surface. This surfactant consists of a hydrophilic polar functional group (SO₃Na) and a hydrophobic hydrocarbon chain [CH₃(CH₂)₁₁-C₁₀H₆]. The latter prevents the molecules from dissolving into the water. This is further helped by adding 2% NaCl to the water.

The molecules were first dissolved in methanol and then spread on the water surface by a µ pipette. Evaporation of the methanol left the SDNS molecules uniformly distributed on the surface. The water trough was made out of glass and the edges of it were coated with paraffine. The thermal agitation of the SDNS molecules on the water surface produces a two-dimensional surface pressure \(\pi\), which is equal to the reduction of the surface tension of the water. The latter was determined by measuring the force acting on a thin Pt float which was hung half in the water on a balance.8 Figure 1 shows the measured \(\pi\) as a function of the surface area per molecule \((A)\) for SDNS on water containing 2% NaCl. The \(\pi-A\) diagram does not exhibit any discontinuous phase transition usually observed in this pressure range for this type of molecular monolayer.1

For the SHG measurement, we used the frequency doubled output of a Q-switched Nd⁺:YAG laser at 532 nm with a ~7-nsec pulse duration as the pump beam. Using a pulse energy ~20 mJ incident on the SDNS covered water surface with a beam cross section ~0.6 cm², we found a SH signal ~0.1 photon/pulse at \(\pi = 5\) mN/m. Each data point was obtained by averaging over 3000–6000 pulses. There was also a detectable SH signal from the water (~0.025 photon/pulse), which constituted the background.
shown in Fig. 1, which also does not display any phase-monolayer systems, the does exhibit a discontinuity attributed to an orientational surface pressures. This agrees with the no observable orientational phase transition in this range of transitional discontinuity. Usually, in other surfactant SDNS on water varied smoothly with \( \pi \) down to 0.1 mNm\(^{-1}\) without exhibiting any discontinuity. Below \( \pi \approx 0.1 \) mNm\(^{-1}\), the signal-to-noise ratio was too small to be meaningful. Thus, we conclude that in the present case there is no measurable orientational distribution in \( \theta \). Figure 2 shows the result on how \( \theta \) of SDNS on water varies with the surface pressure \( \pi \). In the high-pressure range, the molecules exhibited a characteristic tilt of \( \sim 30^\circ \) from the surface normal. This is presumably the result of the steric effect of the molecular structure.

In analyzing the data, we assumed a \( \delta \)-function for the orientational distribution in \( \theta \). This means that the orientation of SDNS would be specified by a single value of \( \theta \). Figure 2 then gives the result on how \( \theta \) of SDNS on water varies with the surface pressure \( \pi \). It appears that at high pressures towards a saturated monolayer, the molecules tilted at \( \sim 30^\circ \) from the surface normal, while at low pressures, they inclined more towards the surface plane.

In conclusion, we have shown for the first time how opti-
cal second-harmonic generation can be used to measure the average molecular orientation of a molecular monolayer at a water-air interface. The orientation of the SDNS molecules appears to vary continuously and tilt more towards the surface normal with increasing surface pressure. It shows no discontinuity in the variation and approaches a limiting inclination angle $-30^\circ$.

One of the authors (T.R.) gratefully acknowledges financial support from IBM. We would also like to thank P. Steyn for his assistance in measuring the $\pi-A$ diagram. This work was supported by the Director, Office of Energy Research, Office of Basic Energy Sciences, Materials Sciences Division of the U.S. Department of Energy under Contract No. DE-AC03-76SF00098.

1For a review, see, e.g., G. M. Bell, L. L. Coombs, and L. J. Dunne, Chem. Rev. 81, 15 (1981), and references therein.