Quantitative spectral analysis of multicomponent equilibria

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Received 17 June 1994; revised manuscript received 30 August 1994

Abstract

A generalization is presented of a method for the determination of equilibrium constants for binary mixtures. It is shown that titrations involving several components can be quantitatively characterized in terms of component concentrations and spectral responses, even when none of the component spectra is known and the components cannot be obtained in pure form. The method is efficient even if the component spectra overlap extensively. It is applicable to all spectroscopic techniques that provide a linear response, opening up new possibilities to analyze complex chemical systems. The approach is illustrated by determining the absorption spectra and protolytic constants for the fluorescein protolytic equilibria.

Keywords: Multicomponent equilibria

1. Introduction

Spectroscopic methods are frequently used to analyze chemical equilibria. If the components involved can be obtained in pure form, or if their spectral responses do not overlap, such analysis is, in general, trivial. For many systems, particularly those with similar components, this is not the case, and these have been difficult to analyze. In 1971 Lawton and Sylvestre [1] introduced chemometric methods for spectral analysis. In their classical paper they showed that even two-component titrations cannot be analyzed unambiguously, and they provided means to obtain limiting solutions by assuming non-negative concentrations and signal responses. These criteria are difficult to apply to real data owing to noise, which can always be negative, and approaches to mitigate these criteria have been developed [2]. Attempts have also been made to extend their treatment to more components [3], but so far only with limited success. Still common to these methods is that they do not provide a unique solution based on physical criteria, but only limit the number of possible solutions.

Recently we developed a new method that provides a unique solution by requiring that the calculated concentrations obey an assumed equilibrium expression, and applied it successfully for two component equilibria [4]. In this work we extend this treatment to multicomponent mixtures and demonstrate its applicability by determining the absorption spectra of the four protolytic forms of fluorescein and the corresponding protolytic constants.

2. Theory

Spectra of the titration samples are digitized and arranged in a data matrix A, which is decomposed into
an orthonormal basis set (Fig. 1) by Nipals or any equivalent method [5]:

$$\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{TP'} + \mathbf{E} \approx \mathbf{TP'} = \sum_{i=1}^{r} t_i p_i'$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

where the orthogonal target vectors $t_i$ and orthonormal projection vectors $p_i'$ are mathematical constructs that cannot be directly related to component spectra and concentrations. $r$ is the number of independent spectroscopic components, which corresponds to the number of light-absorbing chemical species. It is determined by visual inspection of the $t$ and $p'$ vectors or by performing a chi²-test [6]. E is an error matrix.

Assuming linear response the spectra in matrix $\mathbf{A}$ are linear combinations of the concentrations, $\mathbf{C}$, and spectral responses, $\mathbf{V}$, of the chemical components.

$$\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{C} \mathbf{V} + \mathbf{E} = \mathbf{C} \mathbf{V} = \sum_{i=1}^{r} c_i v_i$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

From Eqs. 1 and 2 follows that there is a square matrix $\mathbf{R}$ ($r \times r$) that satisfies

$$\mathbf{T} = \mathbf{CR}$$  \hspace{1cm} (3a)

$$\mathbf{P'} = \mathbf{R}^{-1} \mathbf{V}$$  \hspace{1cm} (3b)

since $\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{C} \mathbf{V} = \mathbf{C} (\mathbf{R} \mathbf{R}^{-1}) \mathbf{V} = (\mathbf{C} \mathbf{R}) (\mathbf{R}^{-1} \mathbf{V}) = \mathbf{TP'}$. If $\mathbf{R}$ can be determined the spectral responses ($\mathbf{V}$) and concentrations ($\mathbf{C}$) of the components can be calculated from the target ($\mathbf{T}$) and projection ($\mathbf{P'}$) matrices:

$$\mathbf{C} = \mathbf{TR}^{-1}$$  \hspace{1cm} (4a)

$$\mathbf{V} = \mathbf{RP'}$$  \hspace{1cm} (4b)

Matrix $\mathbf{R}$ is determined as follows. Concentrations of the chemical species are calculated from the equilibrium expressions for various trial values of the equilibrium constants, and are fitted to the calculated target vectors according to Eq. 3a. The accuracy of this fit depends crucially on the trial values of the equilibrium constants, and best fit determines their values and the elements of matrix $\mathbf{R}$.

3. Experimental

Fluorescein was purchased from Sigma. It was found to contain no significant amount of contaminants and was used without further purification. Its concentration was determined spectrophotometrically, assuming a molar absorptivity of the dianion in 0.1 M NaOH of 76,900 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹ [7] (unpublished results). Samples containing 14 µM fluorescein in 50 mM buffer at various pH (phosphate at pH ≥ 5 and citrate at pH < 5) were prepared and absorption spectra were recorded on a CARY 2300 spectrometer. The optical pathlength was 1 cm and spectral data were collected at a resolution of five data points per nanometer.

4. Results and discussion

Fluorescein in aqueous solution is present as cation, FH⁺, neutral species, FH₂, anion, FH⁻, and dianion, F²⁻. Their equilibria have been studied by absorption spectrometry previously [8, 9], and the problem is acknowledged as very complex owing to extensive spectral overlap of the protolytic forms and the small difference between the successive protolytic constants. Other techniques, such as NMR spectrometry and fluorometry, are not applicable owing to the tendency of fluorescein to aggregate at high concentrations [10] and to protolytic reactions in excited state (unpublished results).

Fig. 2 (top left) shows 17 absorption spectra of fluorescein recorded in the pH range 2–9.5. From inspection of the experimental spectra it is hard to guess even the number of protolytic species involved. The calculated four most significant projection vectors, $p'$, are shown in Fig. 2 (bottom left). They all have clear spectral features, as compared to noise, evidencing the presence of four spectroscopically distinguishable
components. Their shapes, however, are clearly unphysical and cannot be directly related to the spectral responses of the four protolytic forms.

The concentrations of the four protolytic forms are given by:

$$c_{\text{FH}^+} = c_{\text{H}^+} + K_1 c_{\text{H}^2+} + K_1 K_2 c_{\text{H}} + K_1 K_2 K_3 c_{\text{tot}}$$

$$c_{\text{FH}^2} = c_{\text{H}^2+} + K_1 c_{\text{H}^3+} + K_1 K_2 c_{\text{H}} + K_1 K_2 K_3 c_{\text{tot}}$$

$$c_{\text{FH}^-} = c_{\text{H}} + K_1 c_{\text{H}^+} + K_1 K_2 c_{\text{H}} + K_1 K_2 K_3 c_{\text{tot}}$$

$$c_{\text{F}^-} = c_{\text{H}} + K_1 c_{\text{H}^+} + K_1 K_2 c_{\text{H}} + K_1 K_2 K_3 c_{\text{tot}}$$

(5)

where $K_1$, $K_2$, and $K_3$ are the protolytic constants, and $c_{\text{H}^+}$, $c_{\text{FH}^+}$, $c_{\text{FH}^2}$, $c_{\text{F}^-}$, and $c_{\text{tot}}$ are vectors having the concentrations of protons, fluorescein cation, neutral species, anion, dianion, and total fluorescein as elements. The vectors $c_{\text{H}^+}$ and $c_{\text{FH}^+}$ have the square and cube of the proton concentration as elements. Different sets of trial concentration vectors (identified by a hat) were calculated for various trials values of the protolytic constants, and fitted to the target vectors:

$$t_1 = \hat{r}_{11} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^+} + \hat{r}_{12} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^2} + \hat{r}_{13} \hat{c}_{\text{F}^-} + \hat{r}_{14} \hat{c}_{\text{F}^-}$$

$$t_2 = \hat{r}_{21} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^+} + \hat{r}_{22} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^2} + \hat{r}_{23} \hat{c}_{\text{F}^-}$$

$$t_3 = \hat{r}_{31} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^+} + \hat{r}_{32} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^2} + \hat{r}_{33} \hat{c}_{\text{F}^-} + \hat{r}_{34} \hat{c}_{\text{F}^-}$$

$$t_4 = \hat{r}_{41} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^+} + \hat{r}_{42} \hat{c}_{\text{FH}^2} + \hat{r}_{43} \hat{c}_{\text{F}^-}$$

(6)

Each fit defines the elements of a trial matrix $\hat{R}$. The value of the protolytic constants were varied to minimize the sum of square residuals:

$$\chi^2 = \sum_{i=1}^{4} \sum_{j=1}^{4} (T_{ij} - \sum_{k=1}^{4} \hat{r}_{ik} \hat{c}_{kj})^2$$

(7)

This was performed by grid search and a single local minimum with $\chi^2 = 0.018$ was found for
Fig. 3. Subsections of the χ² surface. Top left: dependence of χ² on pK₂ and pK₃ for pK₁ = 2.1. Top right: enlargement of the χ² dependence on pK₂ and pK₃ for pK₁ = 2.1. Bottom left: χ² dependence on pK₁ and pK₂ for pK₃ = 4.30. Bottom right: χ² dependence on pK₁ and pK₂ for pK₃ = 6.41. In the pK₁, pK₃ subsurface a single global minimum is found. In the pK₁, pK₃ and pK₁, pK₂ subsurfaces a single local minimum is observed. Lower χ² values are obtained for pK₁ < 1.75, but this region of the χ² surface can be ruled out since it predicts negative spectral features for the cationic species.

K₁ = 7.9 × 10⁻³, K₂ = 5.0 × 10⁻⁵, K₃ = 3.9 × 10⁻⁷. This corresponds to pK₁ = 2.1 ± 0.1, pK₂ = 4.30 ± 0.02 and pK₃ = 6.41 ± 0.02, where the uncertainties are estimated from inspection of the subsections of the χ² surface shown in Fig. 3. Narrow minima are observed for pK₂ and pK₃, whereas for pK₁ the minimum is more shallow. This implies a higher accuracy in the determination of pK₂ and pK₃ than of pK₁, which is a consequence of the latter falling on the edge of the pH range investigated. In fact the χ² minimum is only local. Lower χ² is obtained with pK₁ < 1.75 (Fig. 3 bottom). These values of pK₁, however, can be excluded since they predict a spectrum of the cationic species with negative features thus corresponding to unphysical solutions. The accuracy of the analysis was checked by systematically removing one or two spectra from the data set. Analysis of these subsets gave in all cases protolytic constants which were within the specified uncertainty limits. The values of the protolytic constants we have determined are significantly different from those determined previously by single-point analysis of absorption data (pK₁ = 1.95, pK₂ = 5.05 and pK₃ = 7.00 [8]; pK₁ = 2.2, pK₂ = 4.4 and pK₃ = 6.7 [9]), but agrees with the previous determination of pK₁ by chemometric methods (pK₁ = 6.44 [4]). This most certainly reflects the much higher accuracy in the present method of analysis which utilizes all spectral information.

The R matrix determined for the optimum set of protolytic constants was used to calculate the spectra of the protolytic forms (Fig. 2, top right). These have a higher signal-to-noise ratio than the recorded spectra owing to the noise reduction achieved by using only the four most significant target and projection vectors in the analysis.

Appearance of maxima, side-peaks and shoulders in the calculated spectra was independent of the values of the protolytic constants within the specified uncertainty limits. When determined from three independent titration series the spectral shapes were practically the same
and the intensities of the 13 peaks and shoulders larger than 3000 M\(^{-1}\) cm\(^{-1}\) varied by less than 10%.

Matrix R was also used to calculate concentrations of the protolytic species (Eq. 4a). These are compared with the concentrations predicted from the equilibrium constants in Fig. 2 (bottom right). This comparison is a self-consistency check of the analysis. Stochastic variations between the concentrations calculated these two ways is a strong indication of successful analysis. Changing the protolytic constants by even small amounts outside the specified uncertainty limits results in systematic variations: data points at pH values below the erroneous pK\(_a\) either falling constantly below the lines, and those at pH values above the erroneous pK\(_a\) falling constantly above the lines, or vice versa.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Engineering Sciences, the Swedish Natural Science Research Council, and by Magn. Bergvalls Stiftelse.

References