41. — THE ROTATIONAL PREDISSOCIATION OF THE CH⁺ ION

by

J.P. FLAMME, H. WANKENNE, R. LOCHT, J. MOMIGNY
Laboratoire d'Etude des Etats Ionisés,
Université de Liège (*), Belgique.

J. LOS, P.J.C.M. NOWAK
F.O.M. Instituut voor Atoom en Moleculardysica
Amsterdam (**), The Netherlands

(*) Institut de Chimie, Sart-Tilman, par B-4000 Liège 1, Belgium.
(**) Kruislaan 407, Amsterdam/Wgm, The Netherlands

Owing to the suggested astrophysical importance of the CH⁺ and CH⁺ ions [1–4] in connection with the chemistry of interstellar medium, we wish to report at this meeting on the population mechanism and the monomolecular decay of CH⁺ ions as obtained by electron impact on methane at low pressure. The decay mechanism as observed in our laboratories with a lifetime in the 10⁻⁶ second range, is described by mechanism (1):

\[ \text{CH}_3^+(\text{CD}_4) \rightarrow \text{CH}_3^+(\text{CD}_3) + \text{H(D)} \]  (1)

This long lifetime decaying process was observed as a «metastable transition» in the first field free region of a double focussing Nier-Johnson type mass spectrometer using electron impact on CH₄. In this instrument the ion source temperature was of about 450 K and the FWHM of the metastable peak enables us to determine a total kinetic energy excess on the decay products of about 5 meV. It was also shown in our laboratory [5] that this process was not populated through a Franck-Condon transition between the CH₄ molecule and the dissociation asymptote giving rise to CH⁺ ions (14.25 eV). In fact the dissociation continuum related to process (1) is populated through the decay of a superexcited state of CH₄ lying near 16 eV. In such a case, the CH⁺ ion appears with a vibrational excitation energy of about 1.75 eV which is not exceedingly high if one takes into account the fact that the process CH⁺ → CH⁺ + H requires at least 5.38 eV in excess with respect to the threshold energy for the appearance of CH⁺.

Furthermore informations about mechanism (1) are resulting from:
(i) an experiment reported by SMITH and FUTURELL [6] which shows that the lower lifetime limit for CH⁺ dissociation through process (1) lies around 10⁻³ sec.;
(ii) the report made by SOLKA et al. [7] of a positive effect on the kinetic energy released in the metastable transition by heating the methane before its ionization between 400 K and 550 K.

These results imply that a possible mechanism for the decay of CH⁺ into fragments could be found in the tunneling of H(D) through a rotational
barrier near the threshold energy of process (1). In such a case, any substantial increase of the CH₄ temperature before ionization would correspond to an increase in the total width of the metastable peak, corresponding to a larger kinetic energy release.

In our more recent experiments, which we will describe in detail in a full paper [¹], the CH₄ temperature was extended up to about 1500 K using a monoplasmatron ion source coupled with the tandem mass spectrometer previously used to detect the position in energy of quasi-bound states in diatomic hydride ions [⁷,⁹,¹¹]. These experiments have shown that if the total width of the metastable peak was, as expected, extended up to 60 meV for CH₄⁺ and to 20 meV for CD₄⁺ by sampling of CH₄⁺ and CD₄⁺ ions in the 10⁻⁶ second range, the occurrence of many quasi-bound states was observed in these metastable peaks by the modulation of the kinetic energy distribution by discrete energy states occurring respectively for CH₄⁺ at 0 – 1.9 – 6.0 – 25.7 – 60.5 meV and for CD₄⁺ at 0 – 0.6 – 2.9 – 6.7 – 12.6 and 20.9 meV.

It follows from the presently reported results that the 10⁻⁶ second lifetime component for the decay of CH₄⁺ and CD₄⁺ by mechanism (1) is due to a rotational predissociation of these ions. In our mind, our results are the first experimental evidence of a tunneling mechanism for the decomposition of a rovibrationally excited polyatomic molecule and also for the lack of randomization of the excitation energy in CH₄⁺CD₄⁺ ions prior to their monomolecular decay into CH₃⁺ and H atom.

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