Probing the chemical composition of interstellar comet 2I/Borisov using ALMA

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Interstellar comet 2I/Borisov originated from the direction of Cassiopeia, and passed through the inner Solar System, reaching perihelion on 2019-12-08, giving us an unprecedented opportunity to study an object from another planetary system in close-up. We used the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) to observe coma gases from 2I/Borisov on 15th-16th December 2019, at high spectral and spatial resolution. Emission from HCN (J=4-3) and CO (J=3-2) was detected, peaking at the expected position (and velocity) of 2I/Borisov’s nucleus. Molecular production rates were derived using a 3D non-LTE radiative transfer code, including excitation due to gas collisions and radiative pumping. The HCN abundance relative to water (~0.12%) was found to be similar to typical Solar System comets, but the CO abundance (~68%) was among the highest observed in any comet within 2 au of the Sun. The observed CO/HCN ratio is an order of magnitude larger than the average ratio in Solar System comets, which shows that 2I/Borisov must have formed in a relatively CO-rich environment. Either 2I/Borisov is intrinsically enriched in CO, or the outgassing of the less-volatile species (H2O and HCN) was more strongly inhibited than usual, relative to the more-volatile CO. Various explanations for the CO-richness of 2I/Borisov’s coma will be examined, and the importance of interstellar objects for our understanding of protoplanetary disk midplane chemistry will be discussed. See Cordiner et al. (2020, Nature Astronomy, doi:10.1038/s41550-020-1087-2) for further details.

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