

# THE CHEMICAL ATMOSPHERIC COMPOSITION OF THE GIANT PLANETS

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## Abstract

For a long time it was believed that the atmospheres of the giant planets, dominated by molecular hydrogen and helium, were similar in composition to the primordial nebula from which they formed. However, this image has strongly evolved over the past twenty years, due to new developments of ground-based infrared spectroscopy, coupled with the success of the Voyager space mission.

Significant differences were measured in the abundances of helium, deuterium and carbon of the four giant planets. The variations in the C/H and D/H ratios have given support to the "nucleation" formation scenario, in which the four giant planets first accreted a nucleus of about ten terrestrial masses, big enough to bind gravitationally the surrounding gaseous nebula; the helium depletion in Saturn has been interpreted as a differentiation effect in Saturn's interior; the apparent helium excess in Neptune, coupled with the recent unexpected detection of CO and HCN in this planet, might imply the presence of molecular nitrogen. In the case of Jupiter and Saturn, disequilibrium species have been detected (CO, PH<sub>3</sub>, GeH<sub>4</sub>, AsH<sub>3</sub>), which are tracers of vertical dynamical motions.

In the future, significant progress in our knowledge of the Jovian composition, including the noble gases, should be obtained with the mass spectrometer of the Galileo probe. The ISO mission is expected to provide new far-infrared spectroscopic data which should lead to the detection of new minor species and a better determination of the D/H ratio.

## 1. Introduction

It has been known for many decades that the atmospheres of the giant planets were mostly composed of hydrogen and helium, with traces of minor compounds in a reduced form. Methane and ammonia were first detected from their near-infrared spectral signatures (Wildt, 1932); hydrogen, expected to be the dominant constituent (Herzberg, 1952) was detected almost thirty years later (Kiess *et al.*, 1960). Helium, expected to be present at the 10% level, was indirectly inferred from the determination of the mean molecular weight, measured by a stellar occultation experiment (Baum and Code, 1953).

The hydrogen-rich composition of the giant planets was understood as an effect of their very high escape velocities. A molecule can escape an atmosphere if its kinetic velocity exceeds its escape velocity. This is more likely if the temperature is high and if the planet is small; in the case of the giant planets, the escape velocity is so high that even the lightest element, hydrogen, cannot escape over the lifetime of the Solar system (Spitzer, 1952). Since the giant planets were massive enough to keep all their constituents by gravitation, their atmospheres were thus expected to reflect closely the chemical composition of the primordial nebula from which they formed. Since abundances were assumed to be solar (or "cosmic") in the gaseous phase of the primordial nebula (with the exception of deuterium, continuously destroyed in stars), abundance ratios in the giant planets were more or less expected to follow the cosmic values.

From the early sixties to the mid-seventies, there was little progress in our knowledge of the atmospheric composition of the giant planets. Then, within a few years, a large number of minor species were detected (Table 1), due to the fast development of ground-based infrared techniques (see Atreya, 1986 and Encrenaz, 1990 for a review). The infrared spectral range is indeed best suited for studying the vibration-rotation bands of neutral molecules; in addition, these cold objects radiate a large fraction of their thermal energy in the infrared, beyond 5  $\mu\text{m}$ . Infrared spectroscopy at various wavelengths allowed astronomers to probe different altitude levels of the atmospheres; in particular, the 5- $\mu\text{m}$  window, observable from the ground and free from methane and ammonia absorption, was very important for detecting minor tropospheric species on Jupiter (Ridgway *et al.*, 1976) and later Saturn (Prinn *et al.*, 1984). This method allowed the unexpected identification of disequilibrium species like  $\text{PH}_3$ ,  $\text{GeH}_4$ ,  $\text{AsH}_3$  and  $\text{CO}$  in the tropospheres of Jupiter and Saturn.

Another major step was the Voyager mission with its two spacecraft which encountered Jupiter in 1979 and Saturn in 1980 and 1981; Voyager 2 encountered Uranus in 1986 and Neptune in 1989. Their infrared interferometers, named "IRIS", measured the infrared spectra of the four giant planets and Titan in the 5-50  $\mu\text{m}$  range (200-2000  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ), with a spectral resolution of 4.3  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  (Hanel *et al.*, 1979a&b, 1981, 1982, 1986; Conrath *et al.*, 1990). These data, together with the radio-occultation Voyager measurements, allowed a simultaneous retrieval of the helium abundance and the vertical distribution of the thermal profiles on the four giant planets. Determinations of the C/H and D/H ratios on Jupiter and Saturn were also obtained from the study of the emission bands of  $\text{CH}_4$  at 7.7  $\mu\text{m}$  and  $\text{CH}_3\text{D}$  at 8.6  $\mu\text{m}$ .

From all these results, a new picture has emerged, showing evidence for significant differences between the chemical composition of the giant planets (Table 1). An enrichment is observed, for both carbon and deuterium, from Jupiter to Neptune; the helium abundance strongly varies, with a minimum value in the case of Saturn and a maximum value in the case of Neptune. As a last example of these differences,  $\text{CO}$  and  $\text{HCN}$  have been detected recently in the stratosphere of Neptune (Marten *et al.*, 1991, 1993; Rosenqvist *et al.*, 1992), but not in the stratospheres of the other giant planets; their abundances in Neptune are significantly higher than the predicted values.

These important results have been used to revisit the formation and evolution models of the giant planets. It now appears that the formation scenarios of the giant planets were likely to be much more complex than previously thought. By gathering all information coming from objects formed in this range of heliocentric distances (5 to 50 AU), including giant planets, satellites, Pluto and the comets, one should be able to proceed one step further in our knowledge of early formation and evolution processes in the outer solar system.

TABLE 1. Gaseous molecular species in the giant planets (summarized and updated from Atreya, 1986)

SPECIES	MIXING RATIOS (VERSUS H <sub>2</sub> )			
	JUPITER	SATURN	URANUS	NEPTUNE
H <sub>2</sub>	1	1	1	1
HD	6 x 10 <sup>-5</sup>	1 x 10 <sup>-4</sup>	***	***
He	0.11	0.03	0.18	0.23
CH <sub>4</sub>	2 x 10 <sup>-3</sup>	4 x 10 <sup>-3</sup>	2 x 10 <sup>-2</sup>	4 x 10 <sup>-2</sup>
<sup>13</sup> CH <sub>4</sub>	2 x 10 <sup>-5</sup>	4 x 10 <sup>-5</sup>		
CH <sub>3</sub> D	3 x 10 <sup>-7</sup>	4 x 10 <sup>-7</sup>	1 x 10 <sup>-5</sup>	3 x 10 <sup>-5</sup>
NH <sub>3</sub>	3 x 10 <sup>-4</sup>	2 x 10 <sup>-4</sup>		
<sup>15</sup> NH <sub>3</sub>	1 x 10 <sup>-6</sup>			
C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>2</sub>	3 x 10 <sup>-8</sup> (*)	7 x 10 <sup>-8</sup> (*)	1 x 10 <sup>-7</sup>	1-9 x 10 <sup>-7</sup>
<sup>12</sup> C <sup>13</sup> CH <sub>2</sub>	3 x 10 <sup>-9</sup> (*)			
C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>6</sub>	2 x 10 <sup>-6</sup>	3 x 10 <sup>-6</sup>		3 x 10 <sup>-6</sup>
C <sub>3</sub> H <sub>4</sub>	3 x 10 <sup>-9</sup> (**)			
C <sub>3</sub> H <sub>8</sub>	6 x 10 <sup>-7</sup> (**)			
C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>4</sub>	7 x 10 <sup>-9</sup> (**)			
C <sub>6</sub> H <sub>6</sub>	2 x 10 <sup>-9</sup> (**)			
H <sub>2</sub> O	1 x 10 <sup>-6</sup> (*)			
CO	1.5 x 10 <sup>-9</sup> (+)	2 x 10 <sup>-9</sup> (+)		6 x 10 <sup>-7</sup> (++)
PH <sub>3</sub>	5 x 10 <sup>-7</sup>	1.5 x 10 <sup>-6</sup>		
GeH <sub>4</sub>	7 x 10 <sup>-10</sup>	4 x 10 <sup>-10</sup>		
AsH <sub>3</sub>	3 x 10 <sup>-10</sup>	2.4 x 10 <sup>-9</sup>		
HCN	2 x 10 <sup>-9</sup>			3 x 10 <sup>-10</sup> (++)
H <sub>3</sub> <sup>+</sup>	(++)	(++)		

NOTES: Mixing ratios only indicate orders of magnitude

(\*) variable

(\*\*) in the north polar region

(\*\*\*) detected; mixing ratio is very uncertain

(+) detected in the troposphere

(++) detected in the stratosphere

## 2. Constraints in formation and evolution processes

The determination of elemental and isotopic ratios in the giant planets has provided significant constraints upon the formation and evolution of these objects. These ratios (D/H, C/H, N/H...) have been derived from the study of atmospheric species (HD, CH<sub>4</sub>, NH<sub>3</sub>), and the determination of their abundances and vertical distributions. The measurement of these quantities implies the simultaneous knowledge of the thermal

profile  $T(P)$ , which, in the case of the four giant planets, has been retrieved with good accuracy from the Voyager radio-occultation and far-infrared experiments. Once the thermal profile is known, vertical distributions of atmospheric species can be deduced from the measurement of their infrared spectroscopic bands, and a comparison made with synthetic models.

## 2.1 THE CARBON AND DEUTERIUM ABUNDANCES

Carbon was the first species for which an abundance variation was suspected among the four giant planets. The C/H ratio is derived from the  $\text{CH}_4/\text{H}_2$  ratio, which, in the case of Jupiter and Saturn, is believed to be constant over the whole atmospheric range probed in the infrared. On Uranus and Neptune, saturation is expected to take place in the region of the upper troposphere and above, so that the  $\text{CH}_4$  measurement, in order to be meaningful in terms of C/H determination, has to be performed in the deep troposphere. The first indication for a variation in  $\text{CH}_4$  came from the analysis of the visible and near-infrared methane bands, which suggested a strong  $\text{CH}_4$  enhancement on Uranus and Neptune, with respect to the two others (Encrenaz *et al.*, 1974; Lutz *et al.*, 1976). In the case of Jupiter and Saturn, an accurate determination of C/H was obtained from the analysis of the  $7.7 \mu\text{m}$   $\text{CH}_4$  band observed with the Voyager IRIS experiment (Gautier *et al.*, 1982; Courtin *et al.*, 1984). These data, coupled with other analyses in the near-IR range (Combes and Encrenaz, 1979; Buriez and de Bergh, 1981) provided definitive evidence for a carbon enrichment with respect to the solar value, by a factor of 2 in the case of Jupiter and around 4 (+/-2) in the case of Saturn. In the case of Uranus and Neptune the carbon enrichment is believed to be at least 10 times larger than for Jupiter; present analyses suggest a carbon enrichment in the range 25 to 60 (Baines and Bergstrahl, 1986; Baines and Smith, 1990; Fegley *et al.*, 1991; Gautier *et al.*, 1994).

The determination of a carbon excess which significantly increases from Jupiter to Neptune has given decisive support to the "nucleation" formation theory of the giant planets. Two decades ago, a "homogeneous" model was suggested, assuming giant homogeneous gaseous protoplanets with chemical compositions close to solar abundances. However, this model cannot account for the carbon abundance variations observed over the past ten years. In contrast, the nucleation models developed by Perri and Cameron (1974) and Mizuno (1980) does predict an enrichment in heavy elements. In this model, cores of heavy elements are formed first, in comparable masses for all giant planets (about 10 terrestrial masses). This mass is sufficient for the surrounding gaseous nebula to collapse. In the core formation, accretional heating leads to outgassing from ices ( $\text{CO}$ ,  $\text{CH}_4$ ,  $\text{NH}_3$ ,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ...) and/or clathrates/hydrates, and a subsequent enrichment of the outer envelope in heavy elements like C, O, N, etc. As pointed out by Stevenson (1982), infalling planetesimals might also have contributed to the observed enrichment. Since the relative size of the core grows from Jupiter to Neptune, the C/H variations over the four planets are in qualitative agreement with this model (Gautier and Owen, 1989).

If the nucleation model is valid, all elements heavier than H, He and Ne (which are not expected to be trapped in ices) are expected to be enhanced in the atmospheres of the giant planets. We would thus expect to observe excesses of  $\text{NH}_3$ ,  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , etc. However

these measurements are very difficult, because these molecules condense in the four giant planets to form clouds, and a measurement below the clouds is very difficult by remote sensing spectroscopy.  $\text{NH}_3$  seems to be enriched on Jupiter and Saturn (de Pater, 1986), but depleted on Uranus and Neptune (de Pater and Mitchell, 1993), which might be due to cloud chemistry, but is not completely understood at the present time (Gautier *et al.*, 1994).  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  has been detected in Jupiter only (Larson *et al.*, 1975); Carlson *et al.*, 1992); other sources of oxygen may exist, as illustrated by the detection of CO (Beer, 1975). Methane, which does not condense in Jupiter and Saturn, is considered as the best test for measuring the excess on heavy elements in the giant planets.

Deuterium is another isotope of particular interest for bringing constraints on formation scenarios. Unlike the other elements, the deuterium abundance in the protosolar nebula is higher than in the Sun, where deuterium is converted into helium. The protosolar value is about  $3 \cdot 10^{-5}$ , as derived from  $^3\text{He}$  solar wind measurements (Geiss, 1993). It is also expected to be higher than its value in the local interstellar medium today, because of the continuous destruction of deuterium in stars since the formation of the Solar system, 4.5 billion years ago. This variation of the D/H ratio as a function of time can actually be estimated from a modelling of the chemical evolution of galaxies (Delbourgo-Salvador *et al.*, 1985). The observed mean value of about  $10^{-5}$  in the local interstellar medium (Linsky *et al.*, 1993) is consistent with these models.

Deuterium has been detected in the four giant planets, from both the HD and  $\text{CH}_3\text{D}$  molecules. The HD detection (Trauger *et al.*, 1973; Macy and Smith, 1978) directly leads to D/H (the HD mixing ratio being twice the D/H ratio), but the HD lines appear in the visible region and are affected by scattering and blends with weak methane lines. In the case of Jupiter and Saturn, infrared bands of  $\text{CH}_3\text{D}$  (Beer *et al.*, 1972, Fink and Larson, 1978) provide a less model-dependent estimate of the  $\text{CH}_3\text{D}$  abundance, but its conversion into D/H is a function of the fractionation factor  $f$  through the equation  $\text{D}/\text{H} = 1/4f \times (\text{CH}_3\text{D}/\text{CH}_4)$ ;  $f$  is a strong function of temperature (Fegley and Prinn, 1988). For Uranus and Neptune, near-infrared bands of  $\text{CH}_3\text{D}$  are used (de Bergh *et al.*, 1984, 1990). As a result, in spite of large error bars, the D/H in Jupiter and Saturn seems to be close to the primordial value of  $3 \cdot 10^{-5}$ , while the Uranus and Neptune values are a factor of 5 to 10 larger (Gautier and Owen, 1989; Owen, 1992).

In the homogeneous formation model of the giant planets, one would expect the deuterium abundance in all giant planets to be similar to the primordial nebula value. In the nucleation model, in contrast, the deuterium coming from the core might be significantly enriched, as observed in molecules trapped in ices in other Solar system objects, like Titan (Owen *et al.*, 1986) and comet Halley (Eberhardt *et al.*, 1987). As first suggested by Owen *et al.* (1986), the origin of the D/H enrichment in this second deuterium reservoir could be ion-molecule reactions, as observed in the interstellar medium, which would have occurred before the formation of planetesimals. As discussed by Gautier and Owen (1989), the observed excess of D/H in Uranus and Neptune would be in qualitative agreement with both the nucleation model and the "ice reservoir" of deuterium proposed by Owen *et al.* (1986); however, more accurate data are needed before any firm conclusion can be drawn.

## 2.2 THE HELIUM ABUNDANCE

In the Big Bang theory, helium is assumed to have formed mostly in the first stage of the Universe. If there was no differentiation effect within the giant planets, a measurement of  $H_2/He$  in these objects would give a direct measurement of the protosolar helium abundance.

The He I resonance line at 584 Å, detected on Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus from the Voyager spacecraft (Broadfoot *et al.*, 1981; Sandel *et al.*, 1982, Broadfoot *et al.*, 1986), is formed above the homopause and cannot be used for a determination of the helium relative abundance. The  $H_2/He$  ratio has been indirectly derived from a combination of two methods: the inversion of the far-infrared spectra of the giant planets, as measured with the IRIS Voyager experiment, and the determination of the mean molecular weight derived from the Voyager radio-occultation experiments. Large variations were observed in the helium mass fraction: the derived values were (assuming pure  $H_2$ -He atmospheres) 0.18 for Jupiter (Gautier *et al.*, 1981), 0.06 for Saturn (Conrath *et al.*, 1984), 0.26 for Uranus (Conrath *et al.*, 1987) and 0.32 for Neptune (Conrath *et al.*, 1991); the estimated value for the proto-Sun would be 0.28 (Sackman *et al.*, 1990). The helium depletion in Saturn was interpreted as a differentiation effect in Saturn's interior, due to the condensation, in metallic hydrogen, of helium droplets sinking toward the center and depleting the helium content of the outer envelope; the same effect might take place on Jupiter and explain its helium deficiency with respect to the primordial value. It would be less efficient than in the case of Saturn, as helium condensation is expected to have occurred later in the cooling process of both planets, Jupiter starting from a higher temperature. In the case of Uranus and Neptune, the pressure of their interiors does not seem sufficient for metallic hydrogen to be present, so that the helium condensation effect is not expected to take place (Gautier and Owen, 1989). Indeed, the Uranus value appears to be representative of the primordial helium abundance. The helium abundance of Neptune is marginally compatible with the primordial value. However, the value derived for a pure  $H_2$ -He atmosphere shows a slight excess with regard to this value. A possible explanation might be that molecular nitrogen is present in its interior at the 0.3% level, while the helium abundance would be, as in Uranus, primordial (Conrath *et al.*, 1993). This nitrogen abundance would explain the molecular weight excess possibly detected on Neptune, and could be responsible for the presence of stratospheric HCN in this planet (Gautier *et al.*, 1994). This result, if confirmed, would have important implications upon the chemical nature of planetesimals from which the giant planets formed. Finally, an important question which remains to be solved is the origin of the difference between Uranus and Neptune: why are HCN and CO present in the stratosphere of Neptune, but not of Uranus? why would nitrogen be present in the troposphere of Neptune, but not of Uranus? As suggested by Conrath *et al.* (1993) and Hubbard *et al.* (1994), the origin might come from the difference in the internal energy sources of the two planets. In the case of Uranus, the internal heat flux is so small that convection might be inhibited in several layers of the troposphere, preventing upward movement of  $N_2$  from the deep interior.

### 3. Spatio-temporal variations

Several processes can presently alter the chemical compositions of the giant planets, leading to non-uniform vertical mixing and spatio-temporal variations. These processes include condensation, photochemistry, interaction with the magnetosphere and general circulation.

As an example, the study of vertical motions in the giant planets can significantly benefit from the analysis of non-equilibrium species. These minor atmospheric compounds should not be observable on the basis of chemical equilibrium models, but are carried into visibility by upward vertical motions on timescales shorter than their chemical lifetime (Drossart *et al.*, 1989). The most abundant species of this kind is phosphine, which is present in solar abundance in Jupiter's deep troposphere (Ridgway *et al.*, 1976), and is enriched by a factor about 3 in the case of Saturn (Bregman *et al.*, 1975). Other disequilibrium species include CO, GeH<sub>4</sub> and AsH<sub>3</sub>, all detected at deep atmospheric levels in the 5  $\mu\text{m}$  window (Beer, 1975; Noll *et al.*, 1986; Bézard *et al.*, 1989; Noll *et al.*, 1989). In the same way, spatio-temporal variations of condensable compounds such as H<sub>2</sub>O and NH<sub>3</sub> can also be used for deriving information about vertical atmospheric motions (Lellouch *et al.*, 1989).

The existence of aurorae on Jupiter and Saturn has been known for a long time from the Ly alpha emission of these planets (Clarke *et al.*, 1980, 1989; Broadfoot *et al.*, 1981). These regions were also characterized by a strong infrared emission in the bands of methane and various hydrocarbons (Caldwell *et al.*, 1980; Kim *et al.*, 1985; Drossart *et al.*, 1986). This study has known a renewed interest with the detection of the H<sub>3</sub><sup>+</sup> ion in Jupiter's auroral regions (Drossart *et al.*, 1989, 1992; Oka and Geballe, 1990), in the near-infrared range. These emissions appear to be powerful tracers of the thermal profile in the upper stratosphere (Drossart *et al.*, 1993).

### 4. Open problems and future studies

Our understanding of the giant planets has been completely renewed over the past decades. Following the exploration of the four planets by the Voyager spacecraft, and with the support of a very active ground-based observation program, we have successively discovered more and more differences, which are all indicators of their past or present history. In the light of these new results, there are still many important questions which remain to be solved.

One of the basic issues is a precise determination of C/H, D/H and H/He. Unfortunately, an improvement of the C/H determination on Uranus and Neptune seems difficult, because the thermal infrared range gives only access to the upper troposphere and the stratosphere, where methane is likely to condense. The case of deuterium, in contrast, is more favorable. A reliable determination of D/H on the four giant planets should be achievable through the HD rotational transitions, in particular with the spectrometers of the ISO satellite, to be launched in 1995 (Encrenaz and Kessler, 1992). These instruments also should provide an improved determination of the H<sub>2</sub>/He ratio. A

measurement of the noble gas abundances would be crucial for assessing new constraints upon formation scenarios; hopefully this will be performed in the case of Jupiter by the Galileo probe.

Global monitoring of the planets is necessary to understand the photochemical processes now governing their chemical compositions (photochemistry, general circulation). In addition to the exploration of Jupiter and Saturn by Galileo and Cassini respectively, one can foresee promising improvements in the field of ground-based imaging spectroscopy. Present developments include, in particular, infrared cameras with improved spatial resolution and sensitivity. The combination of a Fourier-Transform spectrometer with a bidimensional infrared camera will allow, in particular, a complete mapping of Jupiter and Saturn in the 5-  $\mu\text{m}$  window, and thus a continuous monitoring of their tropospheric compositions; the first adaptive optics instruments are now being developed (Saint-Pé *et al.*, 1993a&b), and will provide an improvement by a factor of 10 in the spatial resolution of the infrared images.

Finally, the spectrographs of the ISO mission could allow the detection of new minor species, especially in the far-infrared range. This search will also be possible from the ground, with the development of submillimeter interferometers and heterodyne receivers.

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