Temperature Dependence of the Rate Constant for the CH$_3$ Recombination Reaction: A Loss Process in Outer Planet Atmospheres

NASA Goddard Space Flight Center

F. L. Nesbitt
Coppin State College

M. A. Iannone
Millersville University

D. C. Tardy
University of Iowa

The methyl free radical (CH$_3$) has been observed in the atmospheres of Saturn, Neptune, and recently by Cassini - CIRS in Jupiter. The recombination of methyl radicals is the major loss process for methyl in the atmospheres of Saturn and Neptune. The serious disagreement between observed and calculated levels of CH$_3$ has led to suggestions that the atmospheric models greatly underestimated the loss of CH$_3$ due to poor knowledge of the rate of the reaction CH$_3$ + CH$_3$ + M → C$_2$H$_6$ + M at the low temperatures and pressures of these atmospheric systems.

In an attempt to resolve this problem, we undertook in our laboratory the measurement of the absolute rate constant for the self-reaction of CH$_3$ at T = 155, 202 and 298 K and P = 0.6 - 2.0 Torr nominal pressure (He). The experimental technique is discharge fast flow with mass spectrometric detection and monitoring of the CH$_3$ decay. The methyl radical is generated via the fast reaction F + CH$_4$ → CH$_3$ + HF. The results were obtained by graphical analysis of plots of the reciprocal of the CH$_3$ signal versus reaction time. Since this is a second order reaction, absolute initial concentrations of the CH$_3$ radicals had to be measured by separate calibration experiments.

The experimental results show that the reaction is in the fall-off region at T = 202 and 298 K. At T = 298K, k(0.6 Torr) = 2.15 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1} and k(1 Torr) = 2.44 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1} At T = 202K, the rate constant increased from k(0.6 Torr) = 5.04 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1} to k(1.0 Torr) = 5.25 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1} to k(2.0 Torr) = 6.52 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}. At T = 155 K, the results indicate that the reaction is either at the high pressure limit or so close that we cannot measure a pressure effect upon the rate constant. At T = 155K, k(0.6 Torr) = 6.82 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}, k(1.0 Torr) = 6.98 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1} and k(1.5 Torr) = 6.91 x 10^{-11} \text{ cm}^3 \text{ molecule}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}. These experimental results will be compared with those from theoretical calculations.

Acknowledgments:
The Planetary Atmospheres Program of NASA Headquarters has provided the funding for this research.