

Surface Chemistry and Colloids

Introduction

Surface chemistry is the study of phenomena that occur at the interface of two phases (solid/gas, liquid/liquid, solid/liquid). This field is critical for understanding catalysis, corrosion, adhesion, and flotation processes. Closely related is the study of **Colloids**, which are systems where one substance is dispersed in another as very fine particles (ranging from 1 nm to 1000 nm), exhibiting unique properties distinct from true solutions or coarse suspensions.

This module focuses on quantifying surface coverage using isotherms and exploring the unique physical and electrical properties that govern colloidal stability.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Distinguish between physisorption and chemisorption, and adsorption versus absorption.
- State and apply the Langmuir and Freundlich adsorption isotherms to analyze surface phenomena.
- Describe the formation and stability mechanisms of colloidal systems, including the role of the electrical double layer.
- Discuss the optical (Tyndall effect) and kinetic (Brownian movement) properties of colloids.
- Explain the concept of Zeta Potential and its relation to colloidal stability.
- Calculate the critical micelle concentration (CMC) from conductivity data.

Key Concepts and Definitions

Term	Definition
Adsorption	The accumulation of molecular species at the surface rather than in the bulk of a solid or liquid.
Adsorbate	The substance that gets adsorbed onto the surface.
Adsorbent	The material that provides the surface for adsorption.
Physisorption	Physical adsorption, involving weak van der Waals forces. Reversible.
Chemisorption	Chemical adsorption, involving chemical bond formation. Irreversible.
Colloid	A heterogeneous system where particles of one substance (dispersed phase) are dispersed in a second substance (dispersion medium).
Zeta Potential	The electrical potential at the boundary of the diffuse double layer around a colloidal particle. Key to stability.

Detailed Discussion

1. Surface Phenomena: Adsorption and its Types

The interface between phases is crucial because the atoms/molecules there are unbalanced in their forces, leading to surface energy (tension) and the tendency to adsorb.

A. Adsorption vs. Absorption:

- **Adsorption:** A surface phenomenon where molecules stick *only* to the surface (e.g., gas on activated charcoal).
- **Absorption:** A bulk phenomenon where the substance is uniformly distributed throughout the bulk of the solid or liquid (e.g., water soaked into a sponge).

B. Physisorption vs. Chemisorption: The strength and nature of the interaction classify adsorption:

Feature	Physisorption (Physical)	Chemisorption (Chemical)
Forces	Weak van der Waals forces	Strong chemical bonds (covalent/ionic)
Heat of Adsorption	Low (20-40 {kJ/mol})	High (80-400 {kJ/mol})
Layers	Multilayer formation possible	Monolayer only

Temperature	Favored by low temperature	Favored by high temperature (initially)
Reversibility	Readily reversible	Irreversible

2. Adsorption Isotherms

An **Adsorption Isotherm** is a graph (or equation) that relates the amount of gas adsorbed by an adsorbent to the equilibrium pressure (or concentration) at a constant temperature.

A. Langmuir Adsorption Isotherm (Monolayer Adsorption): This model is based on three major assumptions: 1) Adsorption is limited to a monolayer. 2) The surface has a fixed number of sites. 3) Adsorption at one site does not affect adjacent sites.

Langmuir Isotherm Equation :

$$\theta = K P / (1 + K P)$$

Where:

- θ : Fraction of the surface covered.
- P: Equilibrium pressure of the gas.
- K: The equilibrium constant for the adsorption/desorption process.

This equation can be linearized to determine K and the maximum capacity:

Linearized Langmuir :

$$P / V = (1 / (V_{max} * K)) + (P / V_{max})$$

Where V is the volume of gas adsorbed and V_{max} is the volume needed for complete monolayer coverage. Plotting P/V vs. P gives a straight line.

B. Freundlich Adsorption Isotherm (Empirical): The Freundlich equation is an empirical (non-theoretical) relationship used to model adsorption, particularly effective over intermediate pressure ranges where multilayer adsorption may begin.

Freundlich Isotherm Equation :

$$x / m = k * P^{1/n}$$

Where:

- x/m : Mass of adsorbate (x) per mass of adsorbent (m).
- k and n: Constants determined experimentally ($n > 1$).

3. Colloidal Systems and Stability

Colloids exhibit unique optical, electrical, and kinetic properties due to their size.

A. Classification of Colloids (Based on Dispersion Medium/Phase): Colloids are classified into eight types, such as **Sols** (solid dispersed in liquid, e.g., paint), **Emulsions** (liquid in liquid, e.g., milk), and **Foams** (gas in liquid, e.g., whipped cream).

B. Electrical Properties and the Electrical Double Layer: Colloidal particles typically carry an electric charge (often negative) due to preferential adsorption of ions or ionization of surface groups. This charge attracts counter-ions in the surrounding liquid, forming two layers:

1. **Fixed Layer:** Tightly bound ions adjacent to the surface.
2. **Diffuse Layer:** Loosely held counter-ions extending into the bulk liquid.

This structure is known as the **Electrical Double Layer**.

C. Zeta Potential (ζ): The **Zeta Potential** is the potential difference between the fixed layer and the bulk liquid. It is not the total surface potential, but the potential at the slipping plane (or shear plane) where the particle and the fixed layer move together.

- **Significance:** A high absolute value of Zeta Potential indicates strong repulsive forces between particles, leading to **high colloidal stability**. Low zeta values allow particles to approach closely, leading to **coagulation** (flocculation or precipitation).

4. Critical Micelle Concentration (CMC)

Surfactant molecules (like soaps) are amphiphilic, having both hydrophobic (non-polar) and hydrophilic (polar) ends. When dissolved in water, they spontaneously associate above a certain concentration to form spherical aggregates called **micelles**.

The concentration at which micelle formation begins is called the **Critical Micelle Concentration (CMC)**. Below the CMC, surfactants exist individually; above the CMC, nearly all added surfactant forms micelles. This transition can be tracked by measuring a sharp change in solution properties, such as molar conductivity.

Measurement: Below the CMC, molar conductivity decreases slowly. Above the CMC, the molar conductivity drops sharply because the highly charged micelle unit moves much slower than individual ions.

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