

# Diffusion - Determination of Diffusion Constants using the Schlieren Method

Protocol for the PC 2 lab course by  
**Vincent Kümmerle & Elvis Gnaglo & Julian Brügger**

University of Stuttgart

authors:	Vincent Kümmerle, 3712667 st187541@stud.uni-stuttgart.de
	Elvis Gnaglo, 3710504 st189318@stud.uni-stuttgart.de
	Julian Brügger, 3715444 st190050@stud.uni-stuttgart.de
group number:	A05
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supervisor:	Xiangyin Tan
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**Abstract:**

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# 1 Theory

Molecular diffusion describes the movement of particles from a region of high concentration to a region of low concentration, which leads to an even distribution of particles.<sup>[1]</sup> It was first discovered by Robert Brown, who observed the random movement of tiny particles suspended in a liquid, which is called Brownian motion. Then German physicist Adolf Fick lay the theoretical foundation for diffusion by formulating two laws.

The first Fick's law describes how the particle flux density  $j(z)$  is connected to the Diffusion coefficient  $D$  and the concentration gradient  $\frac{\partial c(z)}{\partial z}$ , which is shown in Equation 1.

$$j(z) = -D \cdot \frac{\partial c}{\partial z} \quad (1)$$

The physical meaning of the first Fick's law is that a concentration gradient leads to mutual diffusion of particles, leading to an even distribution. The diffusion coefficient can also be defined by the „Einstein relation“ in Equation 2.

$$D = \frac{1}{2} \nu \Delta z^2 \quad (2)$$

$\nu$  is the jump rate and  $\Delta z^2$  the mean square jump distance of particles, assuming that they can only move along the  $z$  axis. Second Fick's law describes the temporal course of concentration as shown in Equation 3.

$$\frac{\partial c}{\partial t} = D \cdot \frac{\partial^2 c}{\partial z^2} \quad (3)$$

Equation 3 states that the concentration equalization proceeds faster the stronger the concentration gradient. By integrating second Fick's law from Equation 3 under certain boundary conditions and using the substitution  $\mu = \frac{z}{\sqrt{4Dt}}$ , Equation 4 for the profile of concentration can be obtained.

$$c = \frac{c_2}{2} \cdot \left( 1 - \frac{2}{\sqrt{\pi}} \int_0^\mu e^{-\mu^2} d\mu \right) \quad (4)$$

By deriving Equation 4, the function is simplified into Equation 5 which leads to the concentration gradient profile having the shape of a Gaussian bell curve, as is illustrated in Figure 1.

$$\frac{dc}{dz} = -\frac{c_2}{2\sqrt{\pi Dt}} \cdot e^{-\mu^2} \quad (5)$$

Assuming that the refractive index  $n$  is proportional to  $c$  and knowing that the gradient has an extreme value at  $z = 0$ , as can be seen in Figure 1, Equation 6 describes the refractive index gradient at  $z = 0$  with the indices of water  $n_1$  and of the salt solution  $n_2$ .<sup>[1]</sup>

$$\left( \frac{dn}{dz} \right)_{z=0} = -\frac{n_1 - n_2}{2\sqrt{\pi Dt}} \quad (6)$$

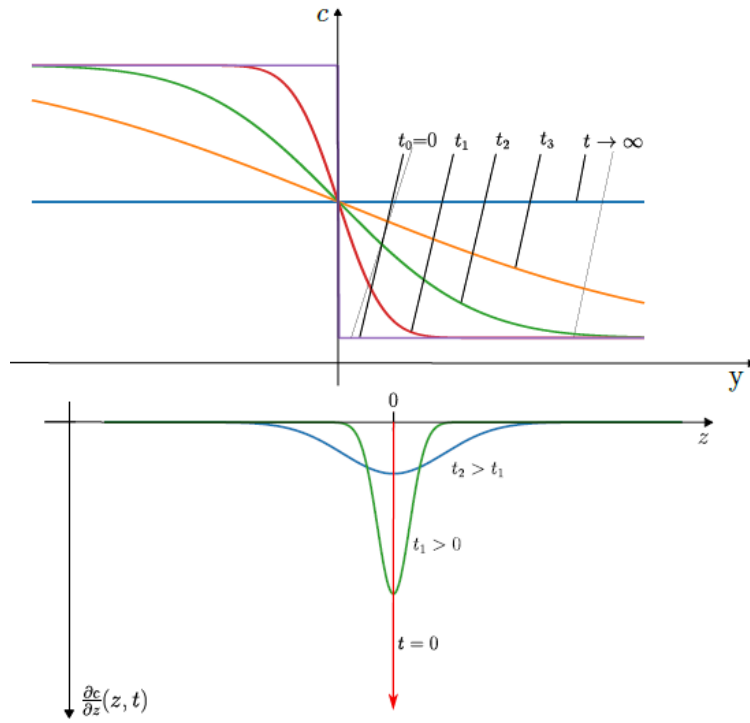


Figure 1: Profiles of the concentration and concentration gradient.<sup>[1]</sup>

Following this argumentation, diffusion leads to a continuously changing refractive index profile which causes a light beam directed to a cuvette of a salt solution with a concentration gradient to be refracted toward the optically denser medium. That is called Snell's law of refraction and shown in Figure 2. The exit angle  $\beta$  and the degree of curvature can be described with Equation 7 and 8, where  $\alpha$  is the angle of incidence and  $r$  the radius of the curvature of the light beam.<sup>[1]</sup>

$$\beta = \frac{n}{n_0} \alpha \quad (7)$$

$$\frac{1}{r} = \frac{1}{n} \frac{dn}{dz} = \frac{d \ln(n)}{dz} \quad (8)$$

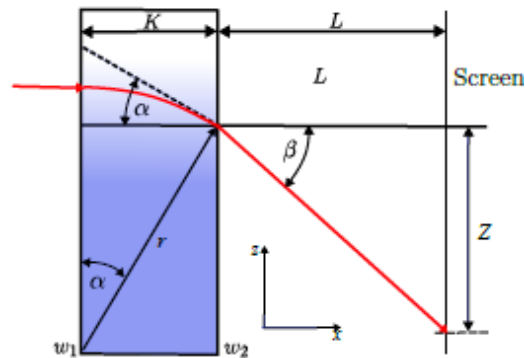


Figure 2: Scheme of the experimental setup geometry.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Huygen's principle states that every point of a wavefront can be seen as the origin of a spherical elementary wave. That's why the path of the light beam is curved in a medium with a spatially dependent refractive index  $n(z)$  due to a lateral phase shift within the wavefront. The strongest deflection is experienced by the part of the beam that passes through the steepest concentration gradient region. With the small-angle approximation and Equation 7 and 8, the refractive index gradient can be described by Equation 9.

$$\frac{dn}{dz} \approx \frac{Z}{L} \cdot \frac{n_0}{K} \quad (9)$$

$L$  is the distance between the cuvette and the screen,  $K$  the thickness of the cuvette,  $n_0$  the refractive index of air and  $Z$  the distance between the straight extension of the beam at the exit point and the impact point on the screen. By equating Equation 9 and Equation 6 and rearranging to the diffusion constant  $D$ , Equation 10 is derived to calculate  $D$  using the Schlieren Method.<sup>[1]</sup>

$$D = \frac{(n_1 - n_2)^2 L^2 K^2}{4\pi n_0^2 Z^2 t} \quad (10)$$

## 2 Procedure

The experimental setup was already built prior to the start of the measurements as shown in Figure 2. The laser beam light path was tilted at about 45°.

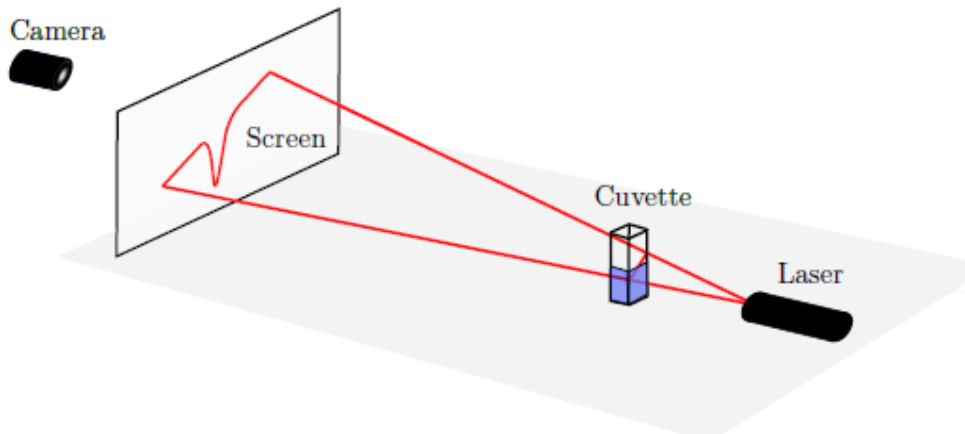


Figure 3: Scheme of the laser beam geometry.<sup>[1]</sup>

The experiment began with

## 3 Analysis

### 3.1 Refractive indices

The refractive indices of deionized water and the different salt solutions were measured with a refractometer and are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Measured refractive indices of deionized water and different salt solutions.

Solution	n
H <sub>2</sub> O (deionized)	1.3375
NaCl (2M)	1.3541
KCl (2M)	1.3514
ZnSO <sub>4</sub> (2M)	1.3725

The NaCl and KCl solutions have similar refractive indices of  $n_{\text{NaCl}} = 1.3541$  and  $n_{\text{KCl}} = 1.3514$ , while the ZnSO<sub>4</sub> solution has a significantly higher refractive index of  $n_{\text{ZnSO}_4} = 1.3725$  than the others. This is due to the much higher polarizability of the larger SO<sub>4</sub><sup>2-</sup> ion with a higher ionic charge in comparison to the Cl<sup>-</sup> ion. Additionally, the higher molar mass of ZnSO<sub>4</sub> results in a significantly higher mass density at the same molar concentration (2M). Na<sup>+</sup> has a higher charge density than K<sup>+</sup> due to its smaller size, which polarizes the surrounding water molecules more, leading to a slightly higher refractive index.

### 3.2 Diffusion coefficients

To evaluate ??, Equation 10 is rearranged to  $Z^{-2}$  to get Equation 12, which shows the connection between the slope  $m$  and the diffusion coefficient.

$$Z^{-2} = \frac{4\pi D n_0^2}{(n_1 - n_2)^2 L^2 K^2} \cdot t \quad (11)$$

$$= m \cdot t \quad (12)$$

## 4 Error Discussion

The refractive indices of the salt solutions deviate from literature values due to manual adjustment of the borderline in the refractometer, which was based on subjective visual inspection. Especially in the case of  $\text{ZnSO}_4$ , the borderline was very blurred, which led to a measurement uncertainty in the refractive index. The measurements of the refractive indices were performed at room temperature without active thermal stabilization, which can lead to deviations as well, since refractive indices are temperature dependent. The influence on the diffusion coefficients calculated with Equation 10 is significant, since the refractive indices appear squared in the denominator.

It is assumed that at a concentration of 2M, the refractive index is still proportional to the concentration. However, at higher concentrations, deviations can occur due to Coulomb interactions between ions,

## 5 Conclusion

## 6 References

- [1] H. Dilger, *2025-pc2-script-en*, **2025**.