Direct observation of single molecule mobility in semidilute polymer solutions

Heiko Zettl,* Ute Zettl, and Georg Krausch†
Physikalische Chemie II, Universität Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

Jörg Enderlein‡
Institute for Biological Information Processing I, Forschungszentrum Jülich, D-52425 Jülich, Germany

Matthias Ballauf§
Physikalische Chemie I, Universität Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

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We determine the mobility of dye-labeled polystyrene molecules in solution by fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) over a wide range of concentrations and molecular weights (ranging from 3.9 × 10^3 to 1550 × 10^3 g/mol). In order to obtain absolute values of the diffusion coefficient, which can be compared to diffusion coefficients determined by other methods, the size of the focal volume has been determined by independent experiments and theoretical calculations. All data demonstrate that FCS is uniquely suited to explore polymer dynamics in solution. The mobility of the chains as expressed through the self-diffusion coefficient is significantly slowed down above the overlap concentration c*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Diffusion and transport in polymer solutions is among the oldest subjects of polymer science [1–12]. It is generally accepted that at least three different concentration regimes must be distinguished when discussing the dynamics in polymer solution: (i) a dilute regime in which the diffusion coefficient $D_0 = kT/6\pi\eta R_H$ is fully governed by the hydrodynamic radius $R_H$, (ii) a semidilute regime in which the coils start to overlap, and finally (iii) a concentrated regime in which the chains form a heavily entangled mesh. Evidently, the onset of mutual interaction will slow down considerably the diffusional motion of coils. Stronger overlap between the coils will lead to entanglements of different chains and motion of single chains proceeds by reptation [5]. Hence, the self-diffusion coefficient $D$ is expected to decrease considerably with increasing polymer concentration. Moreover, its dependence on molecular weight must change when moving from the dilute to the concentrated regime.

This transition from dilute to concentrated polymer solutions has been the subject of a number of theoretical and experimental studies. Graessley presented a study of the dynamics of polymers and considered the entanglement of the chains [6,7]. Phillips proposed a universal formula for the whole concentration range and neglected reptation [9,10]. In contrast, Hess explicitly distinguished three regimes and proposed an influence of the entanglement on the polymer diffusion [11,12]. The most successful concept in this field has been the overlap concentration $c^*$ which delineates the crossover between the dilute and semidilute regimes in which the chains start to overlap. For a polymer with degree of polymerization $N$ and Flory radius $R_F$ de Gennes proposed the following expression for the overlap concentration $c^*$ [3–5]:

$$c^* \equiv \frac{N}{R_F} = \frac{1}{a^2 M_1^{-3\nu} M_w^{1-3\nu}}. \quad (1)$$

Here $a$ is the length of a single polymer segment, $M$ the molecular weight of a monomer unit, and $M_w$ the weight-average molecular weight of the chain. The Flory exponent $\nu$ assumes $1/2$ in a theta solvent and a value of $3/5$ in good solvents [5].

An experimental test of these predictions requires the precise determination of the self-diffusion coefficient of polymers in solutions of varying concentration. Methods used so far include dynamic light scattering (DLS) [13,14], pulsed field gradient nuclear magnetic resonance (PFG NMR) [15,16], and forced Rayleigh scattering (FRS) [17,18]. More recently, fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) became available which monitors the motion of single polymer chains. The enormous potential of this method was shown by several investigations of biological macromolecules, mostly single- and double-stranded DNA in aqueous solution [19–22]. With the combination of confocal microscope set-ups and efficient lasers and detectors the quality of FCS measurements was significantly improved [23–26]. However, for synthetic polymers in organic solvents this technique was only rarely used. Up to now this method has been predominantly used to study the aggregation of block copolymers in organic solvents [27–29]. Recently, Liu et al. used FCS to measure in a very broad range the concentration dependence of the diffusion coefficient for a single molecular weight
In the dilute regime the friction and the respective friction coefficient of the chains are analyzed. For infinite dilution the friction coefficient is calculated from the reciprocal to the coefficient of the chains are analyzed. For infinite dilution the dilute regime often the friction and the respective friction coefficient is approximated by a linear dependence on concentration: $D = D_0 (1 - k_f c)$. Here $D_0$ is the diffusion coefficient at infinite dilution and $k_f$ is a correction factor.

### III. EXPERIMENT

#### A. Dye-labeled polystyrene

Polystyrenes with narrow molecular weight distribution were synthesized via living anionic polymerization. The polymers were end-capped by ethyleneoxide. A small portion of the polymers were subsequently labeled by rhodamine-B via a polymer analogous coupling reaction. Details of the synthesis and the characterization of the polymers are reported elsewhere [31]. The solutions for the FCS experiments were prepared in toluene by blending a constant concentration of $10^{-8} M$ dye-labeled polystyrene with varying amounts of unlabeled polystyrene of the same molecular weight—i.e., from the same synthesis batch. The molecular weight and polydispersity of the polymers are summarized in Table I.

### B. FCS experiments

For the FCS measurements we modified the commercial Confocor II setup (Carl Zeiss, Jena Germany) [34]. A 40X Plan Neofluar objective with a numerical aperture of 0.9 was used to focus the laser beam into the sample and to collect the emitted fluorescence light. The rhodamine-B-labeled PS chains were excited by an Ar-ion laser at 514 nm. The size of the illuminated volume was determined as described by Zettl et al. [31]. Quantitative information on the characteristic diffusion time $\tau_{diff}$ is revealed by fitting the measured autocorrelation data using the Levenberg-Marquardt algorithm to the autocorrelation function shown in Eq. (3). This function assumes that all molecules have the same diffusion coefficient which is related to $\tau_{diff}$ as described in Eq. (4). To avoid evaporation of the organic solvent during the measurement we designed a well-sealed sample chamber with a 0.14-mm-thick cover glass at the bottom. The polymer solutions were freshly prepared with toluene p.a. grade and...
investigated immediately. For each molecular weight three independent measurements were performed. The duration of each measurement was varied depending on the concentration and molecular weight of the sample.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most commercially available objectives and FCS setups are designed for investigations in aqueous environments. Enderlein et al. demonstrated that with these objectives already small changes in the refractive index leads to strong effect in the diffusion coefficient [33]. These findings make it necessary to find proper experimental setups and suitable procedures to determine the size of the observation volume for experiments in organic solvents.

Here we analyze the size of our observation volume by calculations and calibration measurements. The calculations are done on the basis of fundamental wave optical considerations. Seminal calculations of the intensity distribution of focused laser beams were done by Richards and Wolf [36,37]. Their calculations were expanded to confocal setups by Sheppard and Török [38], Török et al. [39,40], and Enderlein [41]. In Fig. 1 the calculated intensity distribution for our setup is shown.

For the experimental determination of the size of the focus the diffusion time $\tau_{\text{diff}}$ of dye-labeled polystyrenes with different molecular weights was determined by FCS measurements in dilute solution [31]. The diffusion time $\tau_{\text{diff}}$ as the function of the known molecular weight then could be used to calculate the waist radius $w_{x,y}$ by comparing our result with published data for the molecular weight dependence of the diffusion coefficient. This procedure yielded a value of 277 nm for $w_{x,y}$. The white bar in Fig. 1 indicates 2 times the experimental determined waist radius ($2w_{x,y} = 554$ nm). Figure 1 demonstrates that the findings of theory and experiment are in excellent agreement. Hence, the present FCS setup leads to absolute values for the diffusion coefficient of individual polymer chains over a broad range of concentrations.

In the following, we will focus on the crossover between the dilute and semidilute concentrations and study these region for various molecular weights in detail. The normalized autocorrelation curves of a polystyrene with a molecular weight of 67 kg/mol show a clear concentration dependence. In Fig. 2 the concentration of the polymer solutions is varied in a range between 0 and 7 wt. % of unlabeled polymer. The autocorrelation curves for polymer concentrations below 2 wt. % are nearly identical. Polymer concentrations of 2 wt. % and higher show a clear shift of the measured curves to higher correlation times $\tau$. To enable quantitative conclusions we fitted Eq. (3) to the data and revealed the diffusion time $\tau_{\text{diff}}$ at the respective concentration. In the low-concentration region (below 2 wt. %) we observe a diffusion time of around $\tau_{\text{diff}} = 240 \mu s$ which only slightly increases with increasing polymer concentration. At concentrations above 2 wt. % the diffusion time increases linearly with the polymer concentration up to $\tau_{\text{diff}} = 820 \mu s$ for 7 wt. % polymer solution.

In order to determine the overall concentration we applied a linear fit to each of the two regimes and defined the point of intersection as $c^\ast$. This procedure was applied for the determination of the overlap concentration of all polymers listed in Table I. The results are summarized in Fig. 3. It should be noted that the linear fit above $c^\ast$ holds only true for a small range of concentrations; for still higher concentrations, a nonlinear increase is to be expected. For the present purpose, however, this approximation is justified since we only aim at the determination of $c^\ast$.

The fit in the regime of lowest concentrations can be used to determine the self-diffusion coefficient $D_0$ at infinite dilution and the coefficient $k_f$ of Eq. (5). With increasing molecular weight the diffusion time of the polymer in the dilute solutions increases and $\tau_{\text{diff}}$ increases markedly. In the

FIG. 1. Calculated intensity distribution of the used confocal setup. The white bar indicates 2 times the measured waist radius ($w_{x,y}$).

FIG. 2. Normalized FCS autocorrelation curves of a 67 kg/mol PS. The polymer concentration was increased from 0 wt. % (solid line) up to 7 wt. % (dashed line). For polymer concentrations below 1 wt. % we received identical autocorrelation curves. Above the concentration the curves shift to higher correlation times with increasing polymer concentration.
following the two regimes clearly visible in Fig. 3 will be discussed.

A. Polymer diffusion in the dilute regime

The intercept of the y axis of Fig. 3 yields directly $D_0$ which refers to polymer chains devoid of any mutual interaction. Hence, diffusion is solely determined by the size of the coils in the respective solvent (see Fig. 4) and $D \propto M^{-0.607}$. From the present data we obtain an exponent of 0.6. This is in the range expected for a good solvent [5].

Figure 5 displays the slope $k_f$ of the linear regime. The quantity $k_f$ reflects the binary hydrodynamic interaction of polymer coils in solution and is expected to increase with molecular weight as $k_f \propto M^{0.8}$ (see the discussion of this point in Ref. [16]). Indeed we obtained an exponent of 0.72±0.15 which is in agreement with this prediction. Only the smallest molecular weight is not fitted by this relation. The polymer with a molecular weight of 3.9 kg/mol is too small, and its diffusion cannot be treated in terms of scaling laws. These results are in agreement with the findings of Callaghan and Pinder [16].

From this section we conclude that the diffusion coefficient of single polymer coils can be obtained precisely by FCS measurements in the dilute regime. In particular, secure data of $k_f$ can be obtained by this method for a broad range of molecular weights. This is due to the fact that measurements can be done for the smallest concentrations without sacrificing the accuracy of the data.

B. Polymer overlap concentration

In Fig. 6 the overlap concentration versus the molecular weight is plotted. We see a power law dependence of the overlap concentration on the molecular weight. From a fit to our data this yields $c^* = 10^{(-3.94±0.27)M^{0.79±0.06}}$. (6)

A comparison of Eq. (6) with Eq. (1) leads to $\nu=0.59$. This finding is in excellent agreement with the exponent predicted by theory for a polymer in a good solvent ($\nu=0.6$). Up to now, only a few groups have studied the overlap concentration of polystyrene in good solvents. In Fig. 6 all values published so far are summarized and compared to our results. Liu et al. determined the overlap concentration of polystyrene with a molecular weight of 309 kg/mol in toluene by dynamic light scattering and compared their results with FCS measurements. They found a good agreement between the two methods. Other groups studied polystyrene in dichloromethane or in benzene. Hervet et al. [17] and Brown and Mortensen [13] measured the change of the diffusion coefficient by forced Rayleigh scattering or dynamic light scattering and determined the change the overlap concentration of polystyrene in benzene and in dichloromethane. Brown and Mortensen additionally calculated $c^*$ from values for the

FIG. 3. The change of the diffusion time $\tau_{\text{diff}}$ with increasing polymer concentration for six different molecular weights. For low polymer concentrations $\tau_{\text{diff}}$ stays nearly constant. Above a certain concentration the diffusion time increases linearly with increasing concentration. To each of these two regions a linear fit was applied, and from the point of intersection the overlap concentration $c^*$ was determined. In the inset the 1550 kg/mol polymer is included.

FIG. 4. Diffusion coefficient $D_0$ at infinite dilution as the function of the molecular weight of the polymer.

FIG. 5. Friction coefficient versus molecular weight. For the analysis of the dependence of the friction coefficient on the molecular weight the data of the smallest molecular weight (4 kg/mol) have been excluded.
Figure 6 demonstrates that all investigations published so far are restricted to a small range of molecular weights. In particular, data referring to low molecular weights have been missing so far. The FCS technique employed here expands the accessible range of molecular weights much beyond the range of molecular weights used previously. The comparison of all data of \( c^* \) obtained so far shows that the absolute magnitude of the overlap concentration may depend on the particular method used for its determination. However, our present data fully verify the power law, Eq. (1), and demonstrate the general validity of the concept of the overlap concentration over a wide range of molecular weights. Moreover, the exponent obtained from the present data is in good agreement with all published data shown in Fig. 6. It hence becomes evident that the overlap concentration \( c^* \) presents a robust concept that may be used to discuss the mobility of polymers at intermediate concentrations.

V. CONCLUSION

We demonstrated that the mobility of single-labeled polystyrene molecules in solution can be determined by FCS over a wide range of concentrations and molecular weights (ranging from \(3.9 \times 10^3\) to \(1550 \times 10^3\) g/mol). All data demonstrate that FCS is uniquely suited to explore polymer dynamics in solution. It is found that the mobility is significantly slowed down above the overlap concentration \( c^* \) as expressed through Eq. (1). The dependence of \( c^* \) on molecular weight is described by the power law, Eq. (1), in an excellent fashion. A comparison with data of \( c^* \) taken from literature demonstrates that the overlap concentration may depend to a certain extend on the method used for its determination. A survey of all data, however, reveals that the concept of an overlap concentration is highly useful to assess the slowing down of mobility at the crossover from the dilute to the semidilute regime.

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