

Towards an understanding of induced-charge electrokinetics at large applied voltages in concentrated solutions

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 8 October 2009

Keywords:

Nonlinear electrokinetics
Microfluidics
Induced-charge electro-osmosis
Electrophoresis
AC electro-osmosis
Concentrated solution
Modified Poisson–Boltzmann theory
Steric effects
Hard-sphere liquid
Lattice-gas
Viscoelectric effect
Solvation
Ionic liquids
Non-equilibrium thermodynamics

ABSTRACT

The venerable theory of electrokinetic phenomena rests on the hypothesis of a dilute solution of point-like ions in quasi-equilibrium with a weakly charged surface, whose potential relative to the bulk is of order the thermal voltage ($kT/e \approx 25$ mV at room temperature). In nonlinear electrokinetic phenomena, such as AC or induced-charge electro-osmosis (ACEO, ICEO) and induced-charge electrophoresis (ICEP), several $V \approx 100 kT/e$ are applied to polarizable surfaces in microscopic geometries, and the resulting electric fields and induced surface charges are large enough to violate the assumptions of the classical theory. In this article, we review the experimental and theoretical literatures, highlight discrepancies between theory and experiment, introduce possible modifications of the theory, and analyze their consequences. We argue that, in response to a large applied voltage, the “compact layer” and “shear plane” effectively advance into the liquid, due to the crowding of counterions. Using simple continuum models, we predict two general trends at large voltages: (i) ionic crowding against a blocking surface expands the diffuse double layer and thus decreases its differential capacitance, and (ii) a charge-induced viscosity increase near the surface reduces the electro-osmotic mobility; each trend is enhanced by dielectric saturation. The first effect is able to predict high-frequency flow reversal in ACEO pumps, while the second may explain the decay of ICEO flow with increasing salt concentration. Through several colloidal examples, such as ICEP of an uncharged metal sphere in an asymmetric electrolyte, we show that nonlinear electrokinetic phenomena are generally ion-specific. Similar theoretical issues arise in nanofluidics (due to confinement) and ionic liquids (due to the lack of solvent), so the paper concludes with a general framework of modified electrokinetic equations for finite-sized ions.

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Contents

1.	Introduction	49
1.1.	Nonlinear “induced-charge” electrokinetic phenomena	49
1.2.	Scope and context of the article	50
2.	Background: theory versus experiment	51
2.1.	The standard model	51
2.1.1.	Electrochemical relaxation	51
2.1.2.	Viscous flow	51
2.2.	Open questions	52
2.2.1.	The “correction factor”	52
2.2.2.	Electrolyte dependence	53
2.2.3.	Flow reversal	54
2.3.	Nonlinear dynamics in a dilute solution	55
3.	Crowding effects in a concentrated solution	56
3.1.	Mean-field local-density approximations	56
3.1.1.	Modified Poisson–Boltzmann theories	56

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3.1.2.	The Bikerman–Freise formula	57
3.1.3.	Hard-sphere liquid models	59
3.1.4.	Interpretation of the effective ion size	60
3.1.5.	Comparison with experiments on blocking surfaces without ion adsorption	61
3.1.6.	Dielectric response in a concentrated solution	62
3.2.	Implications for nonlinear electrokinetics	64
3.2.1.	High-frequency flow reversal of AC electro-osmosis	64
3.2.2.	Field-dependent electrophoretic mobility	66
4.	Viscoelectric effect in a concentrated solution	68
4.1.	Mean-field local-density theories	68
4.1.1.	Modified Helmholtz–Smoluchowski slip formulae	68
4.1.2.	The viscoelectric effect	69
4.1.3.	Charge-induced thickening	70
4.2.	Implications for nonlinear electrokinetics	71
4.2.1.	Electro-osmotic slip at large voltages in concentrated solutions	71
4.2.2.	Ion-specific electrophoretic mobility	73
4.2.3.	Concentration dependence of AC electro-osmosis	75
5.	Mathematical modeling of electrokinetics in a concentrated solution	75
5.1.	Nanoscale physics	75
5.1.1.	Electrostatic correlations	76
5.1.2.	Specific ion–ion interactions	76
5.1.3.	Ion–surface correlations	76
5.1.4.	Surface heterogeneity	77
5.1.5.	Specific adsorption of ions	77
5.1.6.	Normal current and Faradaic reactions	77
5.2.	Modified electrokinetic equations	78
5.2.1.	Continuum modeling approaches	78
5.2.2.	Electrochemical transport	78
5.2.3.	Electrostatics	79
5.2.4.	Electrochemical hydrodynamics	79
5.3.	Modified boundary conditions	80
5.3.1.	Electrostatic boundary conditions	80
5.3.2.	Electrochemical boundary conditions	81
5.3.3.	Hydrodynamic boundary conditions	81
5.4.	Thin double layers and diffusion layers	82
6.	Conclusion	82
	Acknowledgements	83
	References	83

1. Introduction

1.1. Nonlinear “induced-charge” electrokinetic phenomena

Due to favorable scaling with miniaturization, electrokinetic phenomena are finding many new applications in microfluidics [1–3], but often in new situations that raise fundamental theoretical questions. The classical theory of electrokinetics, dating back to Helmholtz and Smoluchowski a century ago [4], was developed for the effective *linear* hydrodynamic slip driven by an electric field past a surface in chemical equilibrium with the solution, whose double-layer voltage is of order the thermal voltage, $kT/e = 25$ mV, and approximately constant [5–10]. The discovery of AC electro-osmotic flow (ACEO) over micro-electrodes [11–13] has shifted attention to a new *nonlinear* regime [14], where the *induced* double-layer voltage is typically several $V \approx 100$ kT/e , oscillating at frequencies up to 100 kHz, and nonuniform at the micron scale. Related phenomena of induced-charge electro-osmosis (ICEO) [15–17] also occur around polarizable particles [18,19] and microstructures [20,21] (in AC or DC fields), as well as driven biological membranes [22]. Due to broken symmetries in ICEO flow, asymmetric colloidal particles undergo nonlinear, induced-charge electrophoresis (ICEP) [15,23–25]. Some of these fundamental nonlinear electrokinetic phenomena are illustrated in Fig. 1.

A “standard model” (outlined below) has emerged to describe a wide variety of induced-charge electrokinetic phenomena, but some crucial aspects remain unexplained. In their pioneering work 25 years ago in the USSR, which went unnoticed in the West until recently [15,16], V. A. Murtsovkin, A. S. Dukhin and collaborators first predicted

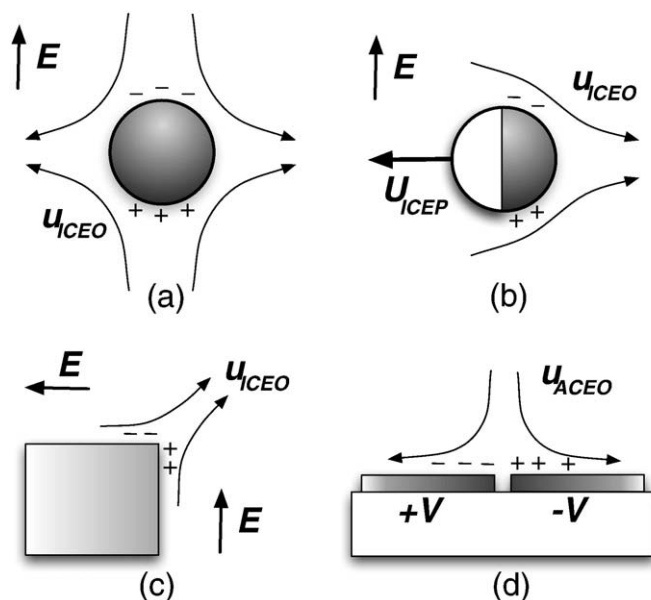


Fig. 1. Examples of nonlinear electrokinetic phenomena, driven by induced charge (+, −) in the diffuse part of the electrochemical double layer at polarizable, blocking surfaces, subject to an applied electric field E or voltage V . (a) Induced-charge electro-osmosis (ICEO) around a metal post [15,16,18,20], (b) induced-charge electrophoresis (ICEP) of a metal/insulator Janus particle [23,25], (c) a nonlinear electrokinetic jet of ICEO flow at a sharp corner in a dielectric microchannel [26,27], and (d) AC electro-osmosis (ACEO) over a pair of microelectrodes [11,12].

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