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Phys. Rev. Lett. **118**, 123002 — Published 21 March 2017

DOI: [10.1103/PhysRevLett.118.123002](https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevLett.118.123002)
Enantiomer-Specific State Transfer of Chiral Molecules

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State-selective enantiomeric excess is realized using microwave-driven coherent population transfer. The method selectively promotes either R- or S- molecules to a higher rotational state by phase-controlled microwave pulses that drive electric-dipole allowed rotational transitions. We demonstrate the enantiomer-specific state transfer method using enantiopure samples of 1,2-propanediol. This method of state-specific enantiomeric enrichment can be applied to a large class of asymmetric, chiral molecules that can be vaporized and cooled to the point where rotationally resolved spectroscopy is possible, including molecules that rapidly racemize. The rapid chiral switching demonstrated here allows for new approaches in high-precision spectroscopic searches for parity violation in chiral molecules.

PACS numbers: 33.15.-e, 33., 07.57.-c, 82.

Chirality plays a major role in many biological processes and chemical reactions. A large number of pharmaceutically and biologically relevant molecules are chiral and exist in one of two mirror images (enantiomers). Although different enantiomers share many physical and chemical properties, their handedness often determines their functionality. Despite the high abundance of chiral species in nature, detecting and quantifying the handedness of a sample remains challenging. The origin of the observed biomolecular homochirality on earth is unknown. A proposed explanation of this is parity violation (PV) effects in chiral molecules, that are predicted to cause tiny energy differences between enantiomers [1,3]. These PV effects have yet to be experimentally measured.

There are a number of established spectroscopic techniques that measure enantiomeric excess - a measure for the purity of a chiral sample, defining the excess of one enantiomer over the other in a mixture of chiral molecules. These techniques include circular dichroism, vibrational circular dichroism and Raman optical activity [1,6], and, most recently, enantiomer-specific microwave spectroscopy (EMS) [7,8]. EMS is inherently mixture compatible and can yield large signal, although it requires the sample to be vaporized and cooled. A natural extension of measuring enantiomeric excess is the separation of the enantiomers from a sample of mixed chirality - an important and challenging task. The most widely used separation techniques are chromatography and capillary electrophoresis [9,10], both of which require specific development and optimization of intricate processes for different molecular species. All current demonstrated enantiomer separation methods rely on chemical mechanisms and are based on enantiomer-specific interactions with auxiliary substances, for example in solution or in an enantioselective chromatographic column. The required time for chiral separation in these techniques is significantly longer than seconds, making chiral separation of rapidly racemizing compounds out of reach.

Here we report enhancement of enantiomeric excess in a specific rotational state using an approach solely based on microwave three-wave mixing [7,8]. The enhancement of either the S- or R- enantiomer population is shown to be controllable by the phase of a single microwave field. Our method is an extension of EMS, where enantiomers are driven with two orthogonally polarized, oscillating, resonant electric fields, and the coherent radiation of the free induction decay (FID) is detected in a third, mutually orthogonal polarization. The emitted radiation has an intensity that is proportional to the product of the molecule’s electric dipole moments $\vec{\mu}_a \times \vec{\mu}_b \times \vec{\mu}_c$. The triple product $\vec{\mu}_a \cdot (\vec{\mu}_b \times \vec{\mu}_c)$ is independent on the choice of the inertia principal axes $a, b, c$, but it changes sign for different enantiomers [14]. The chirality is therefore imprinted onto the phase of the resulting radiation, which is opposite for different enantiomers. This technique has been demonstrated on a variety of molecules, including 1,3-butanediol [7], carvone [15], 1,2-propanediol [8], and menthone [16].

In our method of enantiomer-specific state transfer, enantiomers are driven with three, orthogonally polarized, resonant, phase-controlled electric fields. Species-, conformer-, state- and enantiomer- specific population transfer between two rotational states of a chiral molecule, 1,2-propanediol, is achieved. The key feature of this method is enantiomer-specific population or de-population of a selected rotational state. The relevant states are referred to as $|A\rangle$, $|B\rangle$, $|C\rangle$ in the level diagram of 1,2-propanediol (figure 1). The molecules are subjected to microwave pulses that transfer state population by two distinct paths; directly from $|A\rangle \rightarrow |C\rangle$ and indirectly from $|A\rangle \rightarrow |B\rangle \rightarrow |C\rangle$. The amplitude of state $|C\rangle$ is comprised of contributions from each path, which interfere constructively or destructively depending on enantiomer. This results in opposite, state-specific enantiomeric enrichment in states $|A\rangle$ and $|C\rangle$. The final population in $|A\rangle$ or $|C\rangle$ is probed by driving additional transitions from these states, as in traditional Fourier transform microwave spectroscopy (FTMW).

In order to achieve significant enantiomeric enrichment in a specific rotational state, molecules must initially be
sufficiently cold such that there is a substantial population difference in the relevant rotational states. For the initial population in \( |C\rangle \) to be substantially lower than the initial population in state \( |A\rangle \), a gas phase sample with a rotational and translational temperature of a few Kelvin is required. Such samples are routinely prepared in supersonic jet expansions or, as used here, in a cryogenic buffer gas [18]. Cryogenic buffer gas cooling provides a continuous, high density sample of cold molecules and is particularly well suited for spectroscopy of complex mixtures and radicals. In addition, its continuous nature allows for high repetition rates (typically \( \sim 60 \text{kHz} \)) of the experimental cycle. This is approximately a factor of \( 10^4 \) higher than in typical experiments using supersonic jet expansion. This, and the utilization of cryogenic low noise amplifiers, results in substantially increased sensitivity.

The apparatus used here is similar to the one used in [8], with recent improvements to allow the introduction of microwave fields of arbitrary polarization. A sketch and a picture of the apparatus are shown in figure 2. At the heart of the experiment is a cell \((20 \text{ cm} \times 20 \text{ cm} \times 20 \text{ cm})\), which is cooled to about \( T \approx 10 \text{ K} \). Via a gas fill line, helium is continuously introduced into the cell and the atoms thermalize with the cold cell walls. Warm, gas-phase molecules are produced by heating a liquid sample placed \( \sim 2 \text{ cm} \) in front of the cell entrance aperture. Within the cell, warm molecules and cold helium atoms mix, and the molecules rapidly cool to the temperature of the cell walls via helium-molecule collisions. Under typical conditions, we have \( T_{\text{rot}} \approx T \approx 10 \text{ K} \), a helium density of \( n_{\text{He}} \approx 10^{14} \text{ cm}^{-3} \), and a molecule density of \( n_{\text{mol}} \approx 10^{11} \text{ cm}^{-3} \). Molecules collide with helium atoms approximately every \( \tau_c \approx 6 \mu s \), randomizing the orientation of the molecules and thus destroying rotational state coherence on a timescale \( \sim \tau_c \). Thus, \( \tau_c^{-1} \) sets an approximate upper bound on the accessible repetition rate of the experiment. Two pairs of microwave horns produce microwave fields with \( \hat{y} \)– and \( \hat{z} \)– polarizations and frequencies of \( 12 \text{ GHz} < f_{xy,z} < 18 \text{ GHz} \). The cell wall containing the entrance aperture is electrically insulated from the opposite wall and can be driven directly to produce \( \hat{x} \)–polarized electric fields with \( 0 \text{ MHz} \leq f_x < 200 \text{ MHz} \).

Enantiomer-specific rotational state transfer requires a suitable set of levels appropriate for microwave three-wave mixing. A vast number of polar, asymmetric, chiral molecules \((C_1 \text{ point group, no plane or axis of symmetry})\) possess one or more suitable sets of rotational states. A typical set of usable states is shown in figure 1 where we identify an eligible set of rotational states of our example species, 1,2-propanediol. For clarity, the states are marked \( |A\rangle, |B\rangle, |C\rangle, |D\rangle \), corresponding to \( |A\rangle = (211), |B\rangle = (220), |C\rangle = (221), \) and \( |D\rangle = (212) \), in the \( |JK_\alpha K_\beta\rangle \) notation.

The transitions are driven with a sequence of microwave pulses having \( \hat{x} \)–, \( \hat{y} \)–, and \( \hat{z} \)– polarizations. In the weak pulse limit, the pulse sequence can be understood as follows. Molecules begin preferentially populating the lowest energy state of this group of states \( |A\rangle \). A weak pulse at frequency \( f_{AC} \) and phase \( \phi_1 \) puts the molecules in a superposition \( |A\rangle + \alpha e^{i\phi_1} |C\rangle \), where \( \alpha \) is a positive, real-valued constant that is proportional to the amplitude and length of the pulse. Further pulses at frequency \( f_{AB} \) with phase \( \phi_2 \) and frequency \( f_{BC} \) with phase \( \phi_3 \) put the molecules in the superposition state \( |A\rangle + \alpha e^{i\phi_1} |C\rangle + \beta e^{i\phi_2} |B\rangle + \beta \gamma e^{i\phi_2} e^{i\phi_3} |\mu_a |\mu_b |\mu_c |B\rangle \). Here, \( \beta \) and \( \gamma \) are positive, real-valued constants proportional to the pulse amplitudes and durations, and \( \mu_a, \mu_b, \) and \( \mu_c \) are the molecules’ electric dipole moment components. The probability \( P_{|C\rangle} \) for the molecule to be left in state \( |C\rangle \) is \( P_{|C\rangle} \propto |\alpha e^{i\phi_1} + \beta e^{i\phi_2} + \beta \gamma e^{i\phi_2} e^{i\phi_3} |\mu_a |\mu_b |^2 \).

We experimentally choose pulse lengths and intensities such that the two paths have equal magnitude, i.e. \( \alpha = \beta = \beta \gamma \).
Even given perfect pulse fidelity, two factors limit the enrichment in state $\ket{\text{C}}$. First, the initial population in state $\ket{\text{A}}$ is distributed equally over several $m_J$ states, which are connected to states $\ket{\text{B}}$ and $\ket{\text{C}}$ by different matrix elements, e.g. $\langle 2210|E_z|2200 \rangle \neq \langle 2211|E_z|2201 \rangle$ in the $|JK_aK_cm_J\rangle$ notation. The optimal pulse amplitudes to achieve efficient population transfer depend on $m_J$; in the case of the population being distributed over several $m_J$ states, the pulses
Our method of state-specific enantiomeric enrichment is a resource for high resolution PV searches [1–3]. Small frequency differences between S- and R- molecules resulting from the parity violating nuclear weak force are predicted, but so far have not been observed. The magnitude of the predicted frequency shift $\Delta f$ varies dramatically with molecule, but the fractional shift $\Delta f/f$ is typically less than $10^{-14}$ [1] [21]. Measurement of these frequency differences between S- and R- molecules would significantly increase the enrichment by a factor of $\epsilon$. Therefore, at non-zero temperature, due to the thermal distribution of occupied states, there will be thermally populated states with higher, less populated states would further increase $\epsilon$. In combination, these measures would significantly increase the enrichment by a factor of $\sim 50$, to $\epsilon \approx 30 \%$.

The sensitivity of this method to very slight enantiomeric excess could be dramatically improved by replacing the final readout pulse, $|C\rangle \rightarrow |D\rangle$, with a more sensitive, state-selective detection method. The probed transition could be exchanged for the present cell temperature of $T = 10$ K, is $\epsilon \approx 5 \%$. Here, $P_R$ and $P_S$ are the fractions of R- and S- molecules populating state $|C\rangle$, with $P_R + P_S = 1$. We measure clear state-specific enantiomeric enrichment and depopulation in the target state for opposite enantiomers (figure 4). The demonstrated state-specific enantiomeric enrichment corresponds to $\epsilon = 0.54 \pm 0.05 \%$ when starting from a racemic sample. This modest enrichment could be significantly increased by increasing the power of the applied microwave pulses (the current experiments were limited by the available power amplifiers) and/or by decreasing the cell temperature. Lowering the temperature to $T \lesssim 1K$, which is routinely achieved in supersonic beams and in several buffer gas cooling experiments, would increase $\epsilon$ by a factor of $\sim 10$. Choosing states with higher transition frequencies, or adding additional pulses to exchange the initial unwanted population of molecules in $|C\rangle$ with higher, less populated states would further increase $\epsilon$. In combination, these measures would significantly increase the enrichment by a factor of $\sim 50$, to $\epsilon \approx 30 \%$.

The sensitivity of this method to very slight enantiomeric excess could be dramatically improved by replacing the final readout pulse, $|C\rangle \rightarrow |D\rangle$, with a more sensitive, state-selective detection method. The probed transition could be any rotational, vibrational or electronic transition. This could be realized with LIF, resonance-enhanced multiphoton dissociation, or REMPI, all of which provide sensitive measurements of the population in a given ro-vibrational state, but are in general not sensitive to the phase between two states. The readout could also be achieved using infrared spectroscopy, which has been recently demonstrated in a similar buffer gas environment [20].

Our method of state-specific enantiomeric enrichment is an attractive resource for high resolution PV searches [1–3]. Small frequency differences between S- and R- molecules resulting from the parity violating nuclear weak force are predicted, but so far have not been observed. The magnitude of the predicted frequency shift $\Delta f$ varies dramatically with molecule, but the fractional shift $\Delta f/f$ is typically less than $10^{-14}$ [1] [21]. Measurement of these frequency differences between S- and R- molecules would significantly increase the enrichment by a factor of $\epsilon$. Therefore, at non-zero temperature, due to the thermal distribution of occupied states, there will be thermally populated states with higher, less populated states would further increase $\epsilon$. In combination, these measures would significantly increase the enrichment by a factor of $\sim 50$, to $\epsilon \approx 30 \%$.

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FIG. 4. Enantiomer-specific enrichment of the rotational state $|C\rangle$ of chiral 1,2-propanediol. Variations in the amplitude $S$ of the FID signal of the $|C\rangle \rightarrow |D\rangle$ transition reflect the changing population in $|C\rangle$. The red and blue data show the signal from enantiopure S- and R-1,2-propanediol respectively. The data show the change in the population of state $|C\rangle$, represented by the quantity $S/S_0 - \text{mean}(S)/S_0$, as a function of the phase $\phi_3$ of the $|B\rangle \rightarrow |C\rangle$ drive. Here, $S_0$ is the signal amplitude for the transition $|C\rangle \rightarrow |D\rangle$ with all of the drive pulses off and the $|C\rangle \rightarrow |D\rangle$ probe pulse on, and $\text{mean}(S) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_i(S_i)$ is the mean measurement $S$ over all phases $\phi_3$ with $N$ being the number of measurements and $i$ being the index of the measurement. For further information see the Supplemental Material. The enantiomer-specific phase dependence is clearly visible. The red and blue lines show sinusoidal fits to the data of S- and R- molecules, with root mean squared errors of $7.0 \times 10^{-4}$ and $7.3 \times 10^{-4}$, respectively. With an initially racemic sample, the maximum achieved state-specific enrichment is proportional to the peak-to-peak amplitude of the sinusoidal fit and amounts to $\epsilon = 0.54 \pm 0.05 \%$ [Supplemental Material].

differences will require spectroscopy of high precision, similar to that of searches for the electron electric dipole moment [22]. The method demonstrated here allows for such a measurement on enantiomers from within a racemic (equal amounts of S- and R- enantiomers) mixture, avoiding the requirement for enantiopure samples. In many molecules, the preparation of chirally pure samples is intrinsically difficult because of rapid racemization, either via thermal excitations in room temperature solutions, or via tunneling between enantiomers. To our knowledge, the method demonstrated here is the only demonstrated method that could study enantiomers that racemize in a time $5 \mu s < \tau < 1\text{ s}$.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated a new, widely applicable, non-chemical method to create state-selective enantiomeric excess of chiral molecules. This could provide an important new tool for the search of parity violating terms in the spectra of chiral molecules, or other effects of chirality.

This work has been supported by the US National Science Foundation (NSF CHE-1506868). S.E. acknowledges funding through the Schrödinger Fellowship of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): J3796-N36.

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