### Phase Separation of Polyelectrolyte Solutions

I. MICHAELI,\* Polymer Department, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot J. TH. G. OVERBEEK and M. J. VOORN, van't Hoff Laboratory, University of Utrecht, Netherlands

Solutions of biocolloids and of synthetic polyelectrolytes, like those of uncharged macromolecules, may separate into two liquid phases. This phase separation, called *complex coacervation* by Bungenberg de Jong and Kruyt, will be explained in the present paper by considering the entropy of dilution and the electrostatic attraction among the charged particles. We shall present general outlines for a quantitative approach, and discuss some of the implications. Detailed treatments of specific cases will be presented separately.<sup>2,3</sup>

The condition for a solution to separate into two phases in equilibrium, at constant temperature, T, and pressure, P, may be derived theoretically from an expression for the free enthalpy (Gibbs free energy), G, as a function of composition. For such an equilibrium to exist it is required that the chemical potentials  $\mu_i$  of each component i, be equal in both phases:

$$\mu_i^{\mathrm{I}} = \mu_i^{\mathrm{II}} \tag{1}$$

where I and II designate the dilute and concentrated phases, respectively. It is convenient to introduce a function  $\bar{G}$ , defined as the free enthalpy per unit volume:

$$\bar{G} = G/V \tag{2}$$

The function  $\bar{G}$  is an intensive property of the system; for constant T and P, it is dependent on composition only. With the aid of  $\bar{G}$ , the condition given by equation (1) may be transformed, in the case of constant molal volumes, into:

$$\left(\frac{\partial \bar{G}}{\partial \varphi_{i}}\right)_{\substack{\varphi_{i} \\ j \neq i \\ j \neq 1}}^{\mathbf{I}} = \left(\frac{\partial \bar{G}}{\partial \varphi_{i}}\right)_{\substack{\varphi_{i} \\ j \neq i \\ j \neq 1}}^{\mathbf{II}}$$
(3)

where  $\varphi_i$  is the volume fraction of component *i*. If the number of molecules of the *i*th component is designated by  $n_i$ , and the molecular volume by  $\bar{v}_i$ , then  $\varphi_i$  is given by:

$$\varphi_i = n_i \bar{v}_i / V \tag{4}$$

<sup>\*</sup> On visit at the van't Hoff Laboratory, University of Utrecht.

Clearly:

$$\sum_{i} \varphi_{i} = 1 \tag{5}$$

Equation (3) may be derived as follows: For changes at constant T and P, G may be represented by the expression:

$$G = \sum_{i} n_{i} \mu_{i} \tag{6}$$

or, introducing (2) and (4):

$$\bar{G} = \sum_{i} (\varphi_{i} \mu_{i} / \bar{v}_{i}) \tag{7}$$

From (7) it follows that:

$$d\tilde{G} = \sum_{i} \frac{\varphi_{i}}{\bar{v}_{i}} d\mu_{i} + \sum_{i} \frac{\mu_{i}}{\bar{v}_{i}} d\varphi_{i}$$
 (8)

Since, according to Gibbs-Duhem:

$$\sum_{i} \frac{\varphi_{i}}{\bar{v}_{i}} d\mu_{i} = \frac{1}{V} \sum_{i} n_{i} d\mu_{i} = 0$$

equation (8) simplifies to:

$$d\bar{G} = \sum_{i} (\mu_{i}/\bar{v}_{i}) d\varphi_{i}$$
 (9)

It follows from equation (5) that, for changes at constant  $\varphi_j$ , when  $j \neq i$ , and  $j \neq 1$ :

$$d\varphi_i = -d\varphi_1 \tag{10}$$

Therefore, for such changes we find from equations (9) and (10):

$$(\partial \tilde{G}/\partial \varphi_i)\varphi_j = (\mu_i/\bar{v}_i) - (\mu_1/\bar{v}_1)$$

$$j \neq i \atop i \neq 1$$
(11)

Consequently equation (3) is obtained from (1) and (11).

In order to obtain a theoretical expression for the free enthalpy, G, as a function of the composition of the system, a suitable model must be chosen. For polyelectrolyte solutions the most simple cases are those in which the free enthalpy may be considered as the sum of an entropy of mixing term,  $G_s$ , and an electrical free energy,  $G_e$ , the interactions due to van der Waals forces (van Laar heat term) being neglected to a first approximation. While the latter may readily be introduced, we shall show that the electrical interaction only may suffice to bring about phase separation.

We shall, therefore, consider the above case where:

$$G = G_s + G_e \tag{12}$$

or:  $\bar{G} = \bar{G}_s + \bar{G}_e \tag{13}$ 

Introducing (13) into (3), the requirement of equilibrium becomes:

$$(\partial \bar{G}_s/\partial \varphi_t)^{II} - (\partial \bar{G}_s/\partial \varphi_t)^{I} = (\partial \bar{G}_e/\partial \varphi_t)^{I} - (\partial \bar{G}_e/\partial \varphi_t)^{II}$$
(14)

$$(\partial \Delta \bar{G}_s / \partial \varphi_i) = -(\partial \Delta \bar{G}_e / \partial \varphi_i) \tag{15}$$

where  $\Delta \bar{G} = \bar{G}_{II} - \bar{G}_{I}$ .

Using second derivatives, the equilibrium conditions (15) may be put in the following form:

$$\int_{1}^{II} \frac{\partial^{2} \bar{G}_{s}}{\partial \varphi_{i}^{2}} d\varphi_{i} = -\int_{1}^{II} \frac{\partial^{2} \bar{G}_{s}}{\partial \varphi_{i}^{2}} d\varphi_{i}$$
 (16)

The entropy term in equation (16) usually satisfies the inequality  $\partial^2 \bar{G}_s/\partial \varphi_s^2 > 0$ ; this means that the entropy of mixing counteracts phase separation.<sup>4</sup> It will be shown below, however, that the electrical free energy term, given by the integrand on the right-hand side of equation (16), has the opposite sign,  $\partial^2 G_e/\partial \varphi_s^2 < 0$ . The electrical free energy will thus be seen to favor phase separation. Consequently coacervation occurs if the electrical term is large enough or the entropy term small enough (eq. 16).

We shall examine the electrical effect for two special cases. In one case the electrical free energy will be represented by the simple Debye-Hückel expression; in the other case it will be represented by the expression of Lifson and Katchalsky<sup>5</sup> that was derived for a solution of charged parallel rods with their counterions.

Considering now the Debye-Hückel approximation for univalent electrolytes, the electrical free energy per unit volume is given by:

$$\bar{G}_{e} = G_{e}/V = \kappa^{3}kT/12\pi = -B(\sum_{j}\alpha_{j}\varphi_{j})^{3/2}e^{-3/2}T^{-1/2}$$
 (17)

where  $\kappa$  is the inverse radius of the ionic atmosphere, k is the Boltzmann constant, T is the absolute temperature,  $\epsilon$  is the dielectric constant,  $\alpha_j$  is the number of univalent charges carried by unit volume of species j, and B is a proportionality constant given by  $B = {}^2/{}_3\pi^{1/2}k^{-1/2}e^3$ , e being the charge of an electron.

It follows from equation (17) that:

$$\frac{\partial^2 \bar{G}_e}{\partial \varphi_*^2} = -\frac{3}{4} \frac{B \alpha_*^2}{\epsilon^{2/2} T^{1/2}} (\Sigma_j \alpha_j \varphi_j)^{-1/2} < 0$$
 (18)

Equation (18) shows that the electrical free energy according to the Debye-Hückel expression favors phase separation. However, in the case of solutions containing small ions only, we find that at reasonable concentrations phase separation will not take place, since the electrical interactions cannot counterbalance the high entropy of mixing of the small ions.

In polyelectrolyte solutions, however, the electrical interactions may be larger, and the entropy effect will be smaller, so that coacervation may take place.

Such is the case for a two-component system that consists of a parallel arrangement of electrically charged cylindrical rods in solution with an equivalent amount of counterions, but without additional electrolytes. Ac-

cording to Lifson and Katchalsky<sup>5</sup> the electrical free energy of this system is given by:

$$G_e = n_m F_e \tag{19}$$

where  $n_m$  is the number of monomer units in the system, and  $F_e$  is the electrical free energy per monomer. Introducing (4) into (19), we obtain:

$$\bar{G}_e = \frac{\varphi_m}{\bar{v}_m} F_e = \frac{\varphi_{\text{polymer}}}{\bar{v}_m} F_e \tag{20}$$

where m represents the monomer.

Differentiating equation (20), we obtain for the electrostatic term:

$$\frac{\partial^2 \bar{G}_e}{\partial \varphi_{\text{polymer}}^2} = \frac{1}{\bar{v}_m \varphi_{\text{polymer}}} \left[ \frac{\partial F_e}{\partial \ln \varphi_{\text{polymer}}} + \frac{\partial^2 F_e}{(\partial \ln \varphi_{\text{polymer}})^2} \right]$$
(21)

For the free enthalpy of mixing,  $G_s$ , we may assume that, for this system, it is given by the accepted expression, when the latter contains only terms for the solvent and for the small counterions:

$$\tilde{G}_s = \frac{G_s}{V} = \frac{\varphi_1}{\tilde{v}_1} kT \ln \varphi_1 + \frac{\varphi_2}{\tilde{v}_2} kT \ln \varphi_2$$
 (22)

Here  $\varphi_1$  is the volume fraction of the solvent, and  $\varphi_2$ , that of the counterions.

Differentiating equation (22) with respect to  $\varphi_{\text{polymer}}$ , when  $\varphi_{\text{polymer}}$  is the volume fraction of the electroneutral polymer component ( $\varphi_{\text{polymer}} = \varphi_2 + \varphi_{\text{rods}}$ ), we obtain:

$$\frac{\partial^2 G_s}{\partial \varphi_{\text{polymer}}^2} = \frac{kT}{\bar{v}_1 \varphi_1} + \frac{kT}{\bar{v}_{\text{polymer}} \cdot \varphi_{\text{polymer}}} \tag{23}$$

Combining equations (21) and (23) we now find that:

$$(\partial^2 \bar{G}_e/\partial \varphi_{\text{polymer}}^2) + (\partial^2 \bar{G}_s/\partial \varphi_{\text{polymer}}^2) < 0$$

if  $F_e$  is estimated according to Lifson and Katchalsky for the case of divalent counterions and reasonable charge densities (see L. & K., Fig. 4, and their equations (27) and (7), for  $\nu=2$ ). In this case, therefore, coacervation will take place.

For univalent counterions, however, and for low fixed charge densities, the electrical effect is still too low to counterbalance the effect of the entropy of mixing.

It might be noted here that experimental data on polymethacrylate solutions<sup>6</sup> are in accord with the above conclusions. Numerous other cases of so-called *autocomplex coacervation*, described by Bungenberg de Jong<sup>7</sup> also show that polyions are coacervated by counterions of high valency, but not by those of low valency.

In a similar approach, Langmuir's explained concervation of charged-colloid solutions. He assumed that the electrical free energy in his model

was given by the Debye-Hückel approximation. Unfortunately such an approximation is not valid for the systems he chose.<sup>9</sup> The expression of Lifson and Katchalsky we have used above contains no inherent similar approximation.

However, polyelectrolyte systems could be envisaged where the electrical free energy may be approximated by the Debye-Hückel expression. Such for example is the case of solutions containing two types of macroions of opposite charge together with small inorganic ions; the macroions are supposed to be intermixed flexible coils with a number of univalent charges distributed along the coil and with a charge density sufficiently low for the charges to be arranged in the solution independently of the arrangement of the coils. In that case the electrical free energy,  $G_e$ , may be estimated using the Debye-Hückel theory, while the entropy term,  $G_e$ , may be given by the single Flory-Huggins expression. The former is represented by the equation (17), which has already been written in a form that takes into account the presence of more than one univalent charge per coil. The latter is given by:

$$\bar{G}_s = \frac{G_s}{V} = \frac{kT}{\bar{v}_1} \left( \varphi_1 \ln \varphi_1 + \sum_j \frac{\varphi_j}{r_j} \ln \varphi_j \right)$$
 (24)

where the solvent is indicated by 1, and the ionic species by j;  $r_j$  is the ratio of the molecular volume of component j to that of the solvent. Differentiating equation (24) we obtain:

$$\left(\frac{\partial^2 \vec{G}_s}{\partial \varphi_i^2}\right) \varphi_j = \frac{kT}{\vec{v}_1} \left(\frac{1}{\varphi_1} + \frac{1}{r_i \varphi_i}\right) \tag{25}$$

It follows directly from the chosen model with the quasiindependent charges that the electrical interaction is independent of the molecular weight of the polyions. This can be seen from equation (18) in which the parameter r does not occur. The entropy contribution, however, is particularly small as far as the polyion terms are concerned, on account of the factor 1/r. In these systems, therefore, phase separation may take place. When this occurs, the polyions will strongly accumulate in one phase, the coacervate, but in the same system the microions will be more evenly distributed.

The above implies that small ions affect phase separation mainly through their effect on  $\partial^2 \bar{G}_e / \partial \varphi_{\text{polymer}}^2$ ; if increase of salt concentration makes the latter less negative, as is the case in the above model (see eq. 18), addition of salt will decrease the tendency for phase separation.

Alcohol, acetone, or similar substances of low dielectric constant affect phase separation through the influence of  $\epsilon$  on  $\partial^2 \bar{G}_e/\partial \varphi_{\rm polymer}^2$ . In equation (18), as is generally the case in electrostatic energy terms, the dielectric constant appears in the denominator. Decrease in  $\epsilon$  therefore makes  $\partial^2 \bar{G}_{e'}/\partial \varphi_{\rm polymer}^2$  more negative, thus increasing the tendency toward coacervation.

So, quite a number of experimental features of coacervation (influence of molecular weight (r), charge density  $(\alpha)$ , added salts, organic substances, solvent content of coacervate) are qualitatively explained by this theory when only very general properties of  $G_s$  and  $G_t$  are used. The quantitative results calculated from equations (17) and (24) are also quite reasonable.<sup>2</sup>

The effect of 1-1 electrolyte on complex coacervation is shown in Figure 1. This phase diagram shows the salt-effect calculated for a *symmetrical* case. In this most simple case the salt solution contains *equivalent* amounts of polycations  $P^+$  and polyanions  $Q^-$ ; the macroions are supposed to be *identical* except for the sign of their charge, and the same is assumed for the microions  $K^+$  and  $A^-$ . It follows from symmetry considerations that the above system may be treated as a three-component system, the components being  $H_2O$ ,  $K^+A^-$ , and the polymer  $P^+Q^-$ . The diagram has been calculated for  $r_{K^+} = r_{A^-} = 1$ ;  $r_{P^+} = r_{Q^-} = 1000$ ,  $\bar{v}_1 = 18/6 \times 10^{23}$  cc. per molecule,  $\alpha = 5 \times 10^{21}$  electron charges per cc., and  $T = 298^{\circ}K$ .

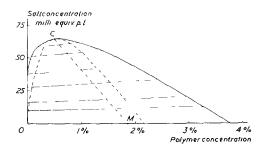


Fig. 1. Phase diagram for complex coacervation (symmetrical case).

For this system it is seen from Figure 1 that addition of salt makes the compositions of the two phases approach each other, while addition of sufficient salt will bring about complete mixing. The salt content, as given by the node lines, is seen to be higher in the coacervate. This slight accumulation of salt in the coacervate phase predicted by theory was hitherto unknown, and has been verified by additional experiments.<sup>2</sup> (The broken curve in Figure 1 represents the so-called spinodial and CM is the rectilinear diameter; see reference 2).

The treatment of phase separation as outlined above may evidently be extended to unsymmetrical multicomponent systems. For such cases it may be convenient to treat each ionic species as an independent component. For such treatment the chemical potentials should be substituted by electrochemical potentials, and equation (1) should be replaced by:

$$\mu_i^{\rm I} = \mu_i^{\rm II} + e_i \psi \tag{26}$$

where  $\psi$  represents the difference in electrical potential between the two phases and  $e_i$  is the charge of the species i.

We have now an additional variable,  $\psi$ , but also the additional equation

of electroneutrality. Such an approach has indeed been applied<sup>2</sup> to the unsymmetrical case of a solution containing polyacid and polybase in an arbitrary ratio, and it was possible to calculate many characteristic properties of such systems, known from experiment.

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#### Synopsis

It is shown theoretically that phase separation may arise in solutions of polyelectrolytes due to electrostatic interactions alone. Two models are considered thermodynamically. In both models the free energy is represented as the sum of an entropy of mixing term and an electrostatic free energy term, while the van der Waals attractions are neglected. In the one model, electrically charged rigid cylindrical rods are in solution with an equivalent amount of counterions but without additional electrolyte. The free electrical energy, in this case, is given by the expression of Lifson and Katchalsky. In the other model the solution contains two types of macroions of opposite charge. The macroions are flexible coils carrying a number of univalent charges, the charge density being sufficiently low. The electrical free energy in this case may be approximated by the Debye-Hückel expression. For both models, it is shown that the decrease in the electrical free energy in a phase separation can, at given temperature and pressure, more than compensate for the increase in the entropy of mixing term. The effects of polymer concentration, dielectric constant, charge density, and salt content follow directly from the thermodynamic treatment of the models.

#### Résumé

On montre théoriquement qu'une séparation de phase peut se produire dans les solutions de polyélectrolytes, uniquement par suite d'interactions électrostatiques. Deux modèles sont considérés thermodynamiquement. Dans les deux modèles l'énergie libre est représentée comme la somme d'une entropie de mélange et d'une énergie libre électrostatique, tandis qu'on néglige les attractions de van der Waals. Dans l'un des modèles, des bâtonnets rigides électriquement chargés sont présents en solution avec une quantité équivalente d'ions de signe contraire, toutefois sans électrolyte en excès. L'énergie libre électrique est donnée dans ce cas par l'expression de Lifson et Katachalsky. Dans l'autre modèle la solution contient deux types de macro-ions de charge contraire.

Les ions sont des pelotes flexibles portant un nombre de charges univalentes, la densité de charge étant suffisament faible. L'énergie libre électrique peut dans ce cas être estimée par l'expression de Debye-Hückel. Pour les deux modèles on montre que la diminution d'énergie libre électrique au cours de la séparation de phase peut, à température et pression déterminées, dépasser l'augmentation du terme d'entropie de mélange. Les effets de la concentration en polymère de la constante diélectrique, de la densité de charge et de la teneur en sels résultent directement du traitement thermodynamique des modèles.

#### Zusammenfassung

Es wird theoretisch gezeigt, dass in Lösungen von Polyelektolyten Phasentrennung auftreten kann, welche durch elktrostatische Interaktionen allein bedingt ist. Zwei Modelle werden thermodynamisch betrachtet. In beiden Modellen wird die freie Energie als die Summe einer Entropie von Mischungsausdrücken und einem elektrostatischen Frei-Energie-Ausdruck dargestellt, während die van der Waals'schen Anziehungen vernachlässigt werden. In dem einen Model befinden sich elektrisch geladene, steife, zylindrische Stäbchen in Lösung mit einen äquivalenten Menge von Gegenionen, aber ohne zusätzliche Elektrolyte. Die freie elektrische Energie wird in diesem Falle durch den Ausdruck von Lifson und Katchalsky gegeben. In dem anderen Model enthält die Lösung zwei Arten von Makro-Ionen von entgegengesetzter Ladung. Die Hauptionen sind biegsame Windungen, die eine Anzahl von univalenten Ladungen tragen, während die Ladungsdichte niedrig genug ist. Die elektrische freie Energie kann in diesem Falle durch den Ausdruck von Debye-Hückel angenähert werden. Für beide Modelle wird gezeigt, dass die Annahme der elektrischen freien Energie in einer Phasentrennung bei gegebener Temperatur und Druck für die Zunahme in der Entropie der Mischungsausdruckes mehr als kompensieren kann. Die Wirkungen von Polymerkonzentration, dielektrischer Konstante, Ladungsdichte, und Salzgehalt folgen direkt aus der thermodynamischen Berechnung der Modelle.

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