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Mechanism and Kinetics of RAFT-Based Living Radical Polymerizations of Styrene and Methyl Methacrylate

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The bulk polymerizations of styrene and methyl methacrylate in the presence of model polymer-dithiocarbonate adducts as mediators and benzoyl peroxide (BPO) as a conventional initiator were kinetically studied. The polymerization rate, hence the concentration of polymer radical P^* , was proportional to $[BPO]^{1/2}$. The pseudo-first-order activation rate constants k_{act} were determined by the GPC peak-resolution method. The results showed that k_{act} is directly proportional to $[P^*]$, indicating that reversible addition-fragmentation chain transfer (RAFT) is the only important mechanism of activation. The magnitude of the exchange rate constant k_{ex} ($= k_{act}/[P^*]$) was strongly dependent on both the structures of the dithiocarbonate group and the polymer. The k_{ex} values for the three RAFT systems examined in this work were all very large, explaining why these systems can provide low-polydispersity polymers from an early stage of polymerization.

Keywords: RAFT / Reversible activation / Activation rate constant / Living radical polymerization

There has recently been a surge of interest in living radical polymerization (LRP) techniques as new and facile synthetic routes to well-defined, low-polydispersity polymers. Mechanistically, these techniques are based on the common concept of alternating activation-deactivation processes (Scheme 1a), in which a potentially active (dormant) species P-X is reversibly activated to the active radical P^* by, e.g., thermal and chemical stimuli. In the presence of monomer M, P^* propagates until it is deactivated by a capping agent X. A number of activation-deactivation cycles allow all the chains to have an almost equal opportunity to grow, resulting in low-polydispersity polymers. This means that the frequency of such cycles, i.e., the magnitude of the activation rate constant k_{act} , fundamentally characterizes the performance of a given LRP.

Recently, a novel LRP using dithio compounds

(Scheme 1b: e.g., X = -SCSCH₃ and -SCSPh) has been developed.¹ The mechanism of activation is supposed to involve a reversible addition-fragmentation chain transfer (RAFT: Scheme 1b) process. The low polydispersity polymers ($M_w/M_n < 1.1$, where M_w and M_n are weight- and number-average molecular weights, respectively) produced in this polymerization even at an early stage of polymerization indicate that these RAFT processes are extremely fast. In this work, we have determined the k_{act} for the RAFT-based polymerizations of styrene and methyl methacrylate (MMA) as a function of polymerization rate R_p and temperature T . In this way, we were able to evaluate the fundamental abilities of these systems, and also experimentally confirm the supposed activation mechanism.

We first examined the polymerization of styrene including a fixed amount of polystyrene (PS)-SCSCH₃

ORGANIC MATERIALS CHEMISTRY — Polymeric Materials —

Scope of research

Kinetic and mechanistic analyses are made for better understandings and systematization of the chemical and physico-chemical reactions occurring in polymerization systems and for the development of better routes to the synthesis of well-defined polymers. By the application of various polymerization techniques, in particular, living polymerizations, new well-defined polymers or polymer assemblies are prepared, and their structure/properties relationships are precisely analyzed for new polymer-based materials of practical importance. Projects in progress include: (1) kinetics and mechanisms of living radical polymerization. (2) Synthesis of new polymeric materials by living polymerizations and polymer reactions and their structure/properties studies. (3) Synthesis, properties, and applications of high-density polymer brushes.



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(0.45 mM) as a probe P_0-X and variable amounts of benzoyl peroxide (BPO: 0–10 mM) as a radical initiator. For all the examined values of $[BPO]_0$, the mean polymerization rate $R_p/[M]$ ($= k_p[P^*]$, where k_p is the propagation rate constant) was found to be constant. The plot of $(R_p/[M])^2$ vs $[BPO]_0$ was almost linear, which is relevant with the conventional (RAFT agent-free) system.

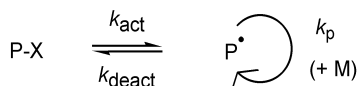
The k_{act} was determined by the gel permeation chromatographic (GPC) peak-resolution method, which focuses on an early stage of the polymerization containing P_0-X . When P_0-X is activated, the released P_0^* will propagate until it is deactivated to give a new adduct P_1-X . Since P_0-X and P_1-X are generally different in chain length and its distribution, they may be distinguished by GPC. By following the change in $[P_0-X]$, k_{act} will be determined. A lower $[P_0-X]_0$ leads to a larger number of monomer units added to P_0^* during an activation-deactivation cycle. In fact, with a sufficiently low $[P_0-X]_0$ (0.45 mM), the GPC curves were composed of two definite peaks such as shown in Figure 1, which allowed accurate resolution. Thus, we could unequivocally follow the $[P_0-X]$ and obtain well-defined values of k_{act} .

The mechanism of activation, i.e., the cleavage of the C-S bond, is supposed to be RAFT (rate constant $= k_{ex}$; Scheme 1b). However, thermal homolysis (rate constant $= k_d$; Scheme 1c) might contribute as well. When both processes are involved, k_{act} takes the form

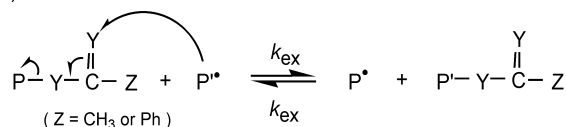
$$k_{act} = k_d + k_{ex}[P^*] \quad (1)$$

Figure 2 shows the plot of k_{act} against $R_p/[M]$ ($= k_p[P^*]$). Evidently, the data points form a straight line passing through the origin, showing that $k_d = 0$ and the slope of the curve gives $C_{ex} (= k_{ex}/k_p) = 180$. This result suggests that the main mechanism of activation in this system is the RAFT process rather than thermal dissociation. With the known value of k_p ($340 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$), k_{ex} is estimated to be

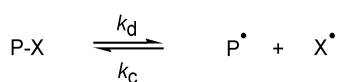
(a) Reversible activation



(b) RAFT



(c) Thermal dissociation



Scheme 1. (a) Reversible Activation, (b) Reversible Addition-Fragmentation Chain Transfer (RAFT), and (c) Thermal Dissociation.

Table 1. Comparison of C_{ex} (60 °C)

P-X	C_{ex}
PS-SCSCH ₃	180
PS-SCSPh	6000 ± 2000^a
PMMA-SCSPh	140
PS-I ²	4.0
PMMA-macromonomer ³	0.20

^a Preliminary result at 40 °C.

$61000 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$. The temperature dependence of C_{ex} was found to be given by

$$C_{ex} = 3.1 \exp(+11.5 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}/RT) \quad (2)$$

We also determined k_{act} in the styrene/PS-SCSPh system and the MMA/PMMA-SCSPh system. The corresponding C_{ex} values are summarized in Table 1. The results clearly show that C_{ex} is strongly dependent on both the structures of carbonate and polymer (alkyl) moiety. In comparison with the C_{ex} values for other exchanging chain transfer-type LRP systems (PS-iodide² and PMMA-macromonomer³ systems), those for the examined RAFT systems are exceptionally large. This explains why these RAFT systems can yield low-polydispersity polymers from an early stage of polymerization.

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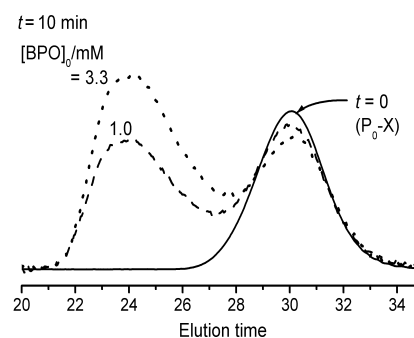


Figure 1. Examples of GPC chromatograms in the styrene/PS-SCSCH₃(P_0-X) system (60 °C): $[P_0-X]_0 = 0.45 \text{ mM}$; $[BPO]_0$ as indicated in the figure.

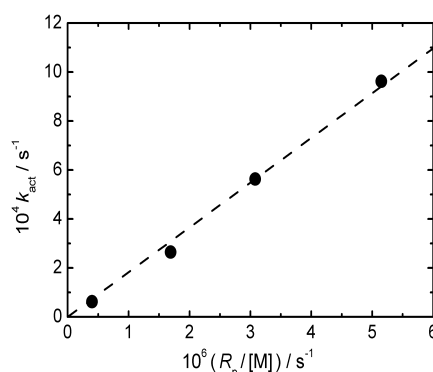


Figure 2. Plot of k_{act} vs $(R_p/[M])$ (60 °C) for the styrene/PS-SCSCH₃ system.