Nanoparticle Taylor Dispersion Near Charged Surfaces with an Open Boundary

Alexandre Vilquin1,2,* Vincent Bertin1,3,4,* Elie Raphaël1 David S. Dean3,5 Thomas Salez3,† and Joshua D. McGraw1,2,‡

1Gulliver UMR 7083 CNRS, PSL Research University, ESPCI Paris, 10 rue Vauquelin, 75005 Paris, France
2IPGG, 6 rue Jean-Calvin, 75005 Paris, France
3Univ. Bordeaux, CNRS, LOMA UMR 5798, F-33405 Talence, France
4Physics of Fluids Group, Faculty of Science and Technology, and Mesa+Institute, University of Twente, 7500AE Enschede, Netherlands
5Team MONC, INRIA Bordeaux Sud Ouest, CNRS UMR 5251, Bordeaux INP, Univ. Bordeaux, F-33400 Talence, France

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The dispersive spreading of microscopic particles in shear flows is influenced both by advection and thermal motion. At the nanoscale, interactions between such particles and their confining boundaries become unavoidable. We address the roles of electrostatic repulsion and absorption on the spatial distribution and dispersion of charged nanoparticles in near-surface shear flows, observed under evanescent illumination. The electrostatic repulsion between particles and the lower charged surface is tuned by varying electrolyte concentrations. Particles leaving the field of vision can be neglected from further analysis, such that the experimental ensemble is equivalent to that of Taylor dispersion with absorption. These two ingredients modify the particle distribution, deviating strongly from the Gibbs-Boltzmann form at the nanoscale studied here. The overall effect is to restrain the accessible space available to particles, which leads to a striking, tenfold reduction in the spreading dynamics as compared to the noninteracting case.

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Our experiments thus allow a study of nanoscale dispersion under adsorption, without the obvious inconvenience of a polluted, physically absorbing surface. Such a particle loss is found to strongly modify the observed particle probability distribution relevant for dispersion. Using an extended moment theory [48–52], we quantitatively recover our experimental APDs, whereas sequential particle observations. In contrast to the few tens of percent noted above for macroscopic systems, we observe a tenfold Taylor dispersion reduction when both boundary effects are present, as compared to the case when they are absent.

We used objective-based, total internal reflection fluorescence microscopy (TIRFM) [47,53], observing individual, negatively charged, $a = 55$-nm-radius, latex colloidal particles. The particles were suspended in pressure-driven shear flows near an interface between salted water and glass [see Supplemental Material (SM) Secs. I and II [19] for videos and experimental details]. These observations yield the particle positions (the apparent height $z_{\text{app}}$ and $x, y$ in-plane positions), resolved to within a few tens of nanometers. The former allows access to altitude probability distributions (APDs), whereas sequential particle observations were linked into temporal trajectories (ca. $10^5$ of them for this study); see SM Video 1 [19]. Displacements $\Delta x = x(t + \tau) - x(t)$ over a delay time $\tau$ from a particle’s first observation time $t$ were thus recorded and used to determine the near-wall shear rate $\dot{\gamma}$ (see SM Sec. II). Also obtained were the variances of the streamwise, $\sigma_{\Delta x}^2 = \langle (\Delta x - \langle \Delta x \rangle)^2 \rangle$ [see Fig. 1(b)], and transverse displacements $\sigma_{\Delta y}^2$, allowing us to calculate dispersion and diffusion coefficients. Independent trajectories were superimposed at common spatiotemporal origins, as in Fig. 1(b) herein and Video 2 in SM, to visualize the evolution of particle ensembles. Particle volume fractions were small enough to ignore interparticle interactions.

The Taylor-Aris theory predicts a rescaled, longtime dispersion coefficient $D_x/D_0 = 1 - \text{Pe}^2/30$ for a linear shear flow bounded by reflecting walls [47,49]. Here, $D_x = \sigma_{\Delta x}^2/(2\tau)$, $D_0$ is the bulk diffusion coefficient of the nanoparticles, and $\text{Pe} = \dot{\gamma}h^2/(2D_0)$ is the Peclet number comparing transport by advection and diffusion, $h$ being the observation zone height. In Fig. 2(a) are shown the normalized streamwise dispersion coefficients as a function of $\tau$, with at least four shear rates used for each condition (see SM Sec. II-D for unscaled data [19]). The normalization uses the depth-averaged $D_x = \sigma_{\Delta x}^2/(2\tau)$ (note the angle brackets in the axis label), which closely approximates the bulk diffusion coefficient $D_0$ [47]. Importantly, we note a strong modification in the dispersion coefficient on changing the salt concentration: the data for the highest salt concentration give nearly a threefold increase in the dispersion, as compared to ultrapure water, as also indicated in Fig. 1(b). We note furthermore that $h$ and $D_0$ are identical for the three different datasets at laser illumination power of $P_{\text{laser}} = 150$ mW in Fig. 2(a). Therefore, the classical Taylor-Aris theory, supposing noninteracting tracer particles in flows bounded by rigid walls, is clearly inappropriate here. This observation motivates a detailed investigation into the influence of the interactions with the walls on dispersion.

At equilibrium, the particles’ concentration follows a Gibbs-Boltzmann distribution with $c_B \propto \exp[-U/(kT)]$, where $U$ is an interaction potential and $kT$ the thermal energy. In Figs. 2(b, i)–2(b, iii) are thus shown experimental APDs, $P$ for identically imposed pressure drops of 30 mbar and different salinities; the distributions are normalized by their maxima and no filtering concerning the time of observation is made. Since the particles and glass surfaces are negatively charged, a repulsive electrostatic interaction that can be obtained from DLVO theory [11] is expected:

$$U_{el}(z) = kT \frac{a}{\epsilon B} \exp \left(-\frac{z-a}{\epsilon D} \right).$$

Here $\epsilon_D$ is the Debye length, $\epsilon_B = e^2/(\epsilon kT) \times [\tan(h\epsilon_p/(4kT)) \tan(h\epsilon_w/(4kT))]^{-1}$ is a surface-modified Bjerrum length [11], and $e, \epsilon, \epsilon_p$, and $\epsilon_w$ are the elementary charge, the dielectric permittivity of the liquid, the particle, and the wall surface potentials, respectively.

The lines in Fig. 2(b) are model fits to the experimental APDs particularly including the Boltzmann distribution $c_B(z)$ with the potential of Eq. (1) as the only energetic contribution—other necessary ingredients, see Refs. [47,54,55], include the finite camera sensitivity.
steady $D_x$ between the highest and lowest laser powers in Fig. 2(a). On exceeding $h$ a particle’s trajectory is no longer considered, as indicated by the crossed-out particle in Fig. 1(a), and thus the open boundary acts as an ideal particle sink. This sink progressively modifies the structure of the particle distribution in the observation zone [4,41], as shown next.

In Fig. 3(a), experimental time-dependent (TD) APDs are shown for pure water, displaying different delay times since the particles’ first observation. As the typical timescale to diffuse out of the observation zone is given by $h^2/D_0$, the TD-APDs are plotted for different values of the dimensionless time $D_0\tau/h^2$. A temporal evolution of the TD-APD is observed, and a steady state is reached for times approaching the diffusion time $h^2/(D_0\pi^2)$ predicted by Taylor [1]. Remarkably, this longtime, steady distribution is different from the QE-APD, thus representing a violation of the Gibbs-Boltzmann distribution, shown in black for comparison.

To assess the effect on the aforementioned probabilistic modifications on the dispersion, theoretically we consider a population of nanoparticles initially located at the origin $x = 0$ (see Fig. 1) and distributed vertically with an initial concentration profile $c(x = 0, z, t = 0) = c_{ini}(z)\delta(x)$. The concentration field $c(x, z, t)$ obeys the advection diffusion equation [22],

$$\frac{\partial c}{\partial t} + v_x(z) \frac{\partial c}{\partial x} = D_x(z) \frac{\partial^2 c}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \left( D_z(z) \left[ \frac{\partial c}{\partial z} + \frac{U_z(z)}{kT} c \right] \right).$$

(2)

where $D_x$ and $D_z$ are the streamwise and cross-stream diffusion coefficients. These latter depend on $z$ due to hydrodynamic forces induced by the no-slip boundary condition at the hard wall [see SM Eq. (S3) [19]]. Zero particle flux at the wall imposes $D_z(z)\delta(x) + (U_z(z)/kT)c = 0$ at $z = a$. As nanoparticles are not followed after they leave the observation zone, the concentration field vanishes at the open boundary, i.e., $c(x, z, t) = 0$ at $z = h$. This Dirichlet boundary condition is equivalent to a chemical absorption reaction with an infinite reaction rate [17].

The moments of the concentration field described by Eq. (2) can be computed in many ways, including the moment [48–52], invariant manifold [26,57], Green-Kubo [30,58], and large-deviation methods [59,60]. Here, we use a moment theory solving for the time-dependent streamwise $p^n$ (with $p \geq 0$) moments $c_p(z, t) = \int_R x^p c(x, z, t)dx$ recursively (see SM Sec. III [19]). Using a modal decomposition, the solution is found to be of the form

$$c_p(z, t) = \sum_{k=1}^{\infty} c_{p,k}(z, t) \exp(-\lambda_k t),$$

(3)
FIG. 3. (a) Rescaled experimental APDs, for the indicated dimensionless lag times and for ultrapure water, $P_{\text{laser}} = 150$ mW and a pressure drop of 30 mbar. The black curve shows the QE-APD [cf. Fig. 2(b)(iii)]. (b) Theoretical prediction for (a), with $3 \times 10^{-4} \leq D_0 \tau / h^2 \leq 3 \times 10^{-1}$. The initial condition (dashed line) corresponds to $c_{\text{ini}} \propto \exp(-U_0/(kT))$, with Eq. (1) and the parameters obtained through fitting in Fig. 2(b). (c) Experimental and (d) theoretical remaining particle fractions, as functions of dimensionless lag time. The color codes are the same as in Fig. 2, and the shades indicate the same varying laser powers as for water. Curves of different salinity are shifted vertically for clarity.

where $c_{p,k}$ are polynomial functions of $t$ of degree $p$ and $\lambda_k$ are the eigenvalues of the corresponding Sturm-Liouville problem, with $\lambda_1 < \lambda_2 < \ldots$. We show in Fig. 3(b) the theoretical TD-APD at different times for an ensemble of particles initially distributed according to a Boltzmann weight $c_{\text{ini}}(z) = c_G(z)$, using the same electrostatic parameters and the absorbing wall at $h$ obtained by fitting the data in Fig. 2(b). The main qualitative features of the experimental observations are recovered: a depletion zone develops near the open boundary while the TD-APD converges toward a steady distribution, corresponding to the spatial structure of the slowest eigenmode with $\lambda = \lambda_1$ [see SM Eq. (S9)].

Importantly, the slowest eigenmode of Eq. (3) has a nonzero eigenvalue such that the total number of particles $m_0$ decays exponentially at long times. This decay is a consequence of the absorbing boundary at the limit of the observation zone. In Fig. 3(c), we show the experimental fraction $m_0(t) = \int_0^h c_0(z,t) dz/\int_0^h c_0(z,0) dz$ of particles remaining in the observation zone, as a function of the dimensionless lag time. No matter the strength of the electrostatic interactions and the laser power, a temporally exponential decay of the number of particles is observed at long times. Similarly, in Fig. 3(d), we show the theoretical fraction of particles remaining in the observation zone, as a function of the dimensionless lag time, for the three Debye lengths accessed experimentally. We again find an exponential decay at large times, i.e., $m_0 \propto \exp(-\lambda_1 t)$, independent of $c_{\text{ini}}(z)$.

From a microscopic point of view, the nanoparticles diffuse out of the observation zone, such that the typical decay timescale is set by the time $\sim h^2/D_0$ needed for the particle to reach the absorbing boundary at the top of the observation zone. Besides, the decay time depends on the electrostatic and hydrodynamic interactions via the ratios between the typical length scales in the problem and the channel size. Altogether, the theoretical decay rate reads $\lambda_1 = (D_0/h^2)F[(\ell_D/h), (z_B/h), (a/h)]$, where $F$ is an unknown dimensionless function to be determined by solving the eigenvalue problem described in the SM Sec. III-B [19]. In Fig. 4(a), we compare experiments and theory for the dimensionless decay time $D_0/(\lambda_1 h^2)$ as a function of the Debye-length-to-channel-size ratio. As expected, the longer the range of the electrostatic interaction (i.e., the larger Debye length), the faster particles leave the observation zone. While there is a small deviation between the measurements and predictions, especially for the unmodified water (blue), the overall trends agree.

Since the open boundary of our experiments affects the TD-APDs, as described in Figs. 3(a) and 3(b) and as dictated by the spatial structure of the slowest eigenmode, our theoretical approach allows a prediction regarding dispersion. Computing the first and second moments of the concentration, we extract the dispersion coefficient of the remaining particles; see SM Sec. III-E [19]. This coefficient converges to a steady value at long times, as in Fig. 2(a). The long-term dispersion coefficient $D_x$ can be written as the sum of the steady-state averaged streamwise molecular diffusion coefficient $D_0$, cf. SM Eq. (S40) [19], and a term induced by the advection-diffusion coupling:
\[ D_x = \langle D_x \rangle + \int_a^h \frac{1}{c_B(z)} \left[ v_x(z) - \langle V \rangle \right] \zeta_1(z) f_1(z) \, dz, \]  

(4)

where \( \langle V \rangle \) and \( f_1(z) \) are the steady-state averaged velocity and the steady TD-APD shown in Fig. 3(b), respectively. The quantity \( \zeta_1 \) is an auxiliary function related to \( f_1(z) \) as in SM Eq. (S19).

In Fig. 4(b) are shown the rescaled, steady dispersion coefficients for all of the experimental salinities and laser powers (colored dots). The general increase of dispersion coefficient with salinity seen is expected due to increased access to the near-wall regions on electrostatic screening, as in Fig. 2. For a quantitative description of the data, we also display predictions of four different models (see SM Fig. S3 for schematics [19]).

The tracer theory of Taylor [1] and Aris [48] largely overestimates the data (black dashed line). Moment theory for a wall with infinite adsorption rate, i.e., an open boundary, but no lower surface interactions with the wall [SM Eq. (S42) [19], solid, dash-dotted line] predicts a significant global decrease in the dispersion coefficient. Both these models are yet independent of salt concentration. The theory of Refs. [22,30] assumes a reflective boundary at \( z = h \) and includes conservative interactions with one wall. Dispersion coefficients from this theory read

\[ D_x = \langle D_x \rangle + f[D_x(z), c_B(z), v_x(z)], \]  

(cf. SM Eq. (S44)), and are decreased as compared to the classical Taylor model (dashed colored lines), yet still overestimate the measured dispersion coefficients.

Finally, the moment theory combining electrostatic interactions and an open boundary at \( z = h \), Eq. (4), quantitatively captures the measurements (solid colored lines), even while noting a small systematic deviation for the pure water case. Figure 4(b) stresses that using an absorbing boundary condition at the limit of the observation zone is necessary to accurately estimate the reduction of the dispersion coefficient measured in the TIRFM experiments. Indeed, the relevant statistical distributions at the heart of Taylor dispersion phenomena are thereby strongly modified. In contrast, the existing theory [22,30] depends only on the APD given by \( c_B(z) \).

To conclude, our collective observations show that chemical- or absorption-induced leakage at boundaries and particle-surface interactions can play a dominant role in Taylor dispersion at the nanoscale. Nanoscale transport is routinely used to measure the physical properties of biological objects and processes, as in Refs. [37–39,42,43,61]. Here, we have demonstrated that the precise nature of particle-surface interaction must be carefully taken into account to yield accurate measurements.

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