The CO A-X System for Constraining Cosmological Drift of the Proton-Electron Mass Ratio

E. J. Salumbides,1,2 M. L. Niu,1 J. Bagdonaite,1 N. de Oliveira,3 D. Joyeux,3 L. Nahon,3 and W. Ubachs1

1Department of Physics and Astronomy, and LaserLaB, VU University, De Boelelaan 1081, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2Department of Physics, University of San Carlos, Cebu City 6000, Philippines
3Synchrotron Soleil, Orme des Merisiers, St Aubin BP 48, 91192, GIF sur Yvette cedex, France

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The A1Π - X1Σ+ band system of carbon monoxide, which has been detected in six highly redshifted galaxies (z = 1.6 – 2.7), is identified as a novel probe method to search for possible variations of the proton-electron mass ratio (µ) on cosmological time scales. Laboratory wavelengths of the spectral lines of the A-X (v,0) bands for v = 0 – 9 have been determined at an accuracy of ∆λ/λ = 1.5 × 10⁻⁷ through VUV Fourier-transform absorption spectroscopy, providing a comprehensive and accurate zero-redshift data set. For the (0,0) and (1,0) bands, two-photon Doppler-free laser spectroscopy has been applied at the 3 × 10⁻⁸ accuracy level, verifying the absorption data. Sensitivity coefficients Kµ for a varying µ have been calculated for the CO A-X bands, so an operational method results to search for µ-variation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The search for a variation of the dimensionless proton-to-electron mass ratio µ = m_p/m_e on cosmological time scales can be performed by comparing molecular absorption lines in highly redshifted galaxies with the same lines measured in the laboratory. Through detection of H2 and HD lines in absorbing galaxies upper limits on µ-variation have been deduced, resulting in a ∆µ/µ < 1 × 10⁻⁵ constraint at redshifts z = 2 – 3.5, corresponding to look-back times of 10-12 billion years towards the origin of the Universe [1,2]. For a reliable comparison a database of accurately calibrated laboratory wavelengths must be available and this has been accomplished through laser spectroscopic investigations of the Lyman and Werner band absorption systems in H2 [3,4] and HD [5]. Furthermore, to make such a comparison operational, sensitivity coefficients Kµ must be calculated for all lines in the spectrum; these Kµ represent the wavelength shift induced on a line by a varying µ. Such calculations have been carried out for the H2 molecule using different methods [6,7] as well as for the HD isotopomer [8].

Through radio astronomical observations of the NH3 molecule even tighter constraints at the ∆µ/µ < 1 × 10⁻⁶ level could be deduced, because the transitions in the NH3 molecule exhibit much larger Kµ coefficients. However, this ammonia method has only been applied in the two systems where NH3 is detected (B0218+365 [10,11] and PKS1830-211 [12]) at redshifts z < 1, or look-back times of 6-7 billion years. In addition the methanol molecule was identified as a molecule with radio frequency transitions exhibiting very large sensitivity coefficients due to the internally hindered rotation mode in the molecule [13,15]. Such methanol lines were observed in the single object PKS1830-211 [16,17] and a constraint of ∆µ/µ < 1 × 10⁻⁷ was derived [18]. Thushfar the radio astronomical observations have been limited to z < 1.

Because the number of useful H2 high redshift absorber systems is less than ten, additional methods are explored for constraining µ variation at redshifts z > 1. Recently a number of high redshift observations were reported on the A1Π - X1Σ+ vacuum ultraviolet absorption system of carbon monoxide, first in Q1439+113 at z_abs = 2.42 [19], then in Q1004+220 at z = 1.64 [20], in Q1237+064 at z = 2.69 [21], and finally in three additional systems Q0857+18 at z = 1.73, Q1047+205 at z = 1.77 and Q1705+354 at z = 2.04 [22]. While these observations, all performed with the ESO Very Large Telescope, were mainly used to measure the local cosmic background temperature we propose to use the high resolution spectral observations of CO A-X to search for ∆µ/µ at these redshifts. We note that, in addition, spectra of the CO A-X system as observed toward Gamma-ray bursts could be used for the same purpose, although the only system with these spectral features detected so far (GRB0606807) was observed at a too limited spectral resolution [23]. The rest-frame wavelengths of the CO A-X bands are in the wavelength range 130 – 154 nm, hence longward of Lyman-α, so that the CO spectral features in typical quasar spectra will fall outside the region of the Lyman-α-forest (provided that the emission redshift of the quasar z_em is not too far from the redshift z_abs of the intervening galaxy exhibiting the molecular absorption). The occurrence of the Lyman-forest lines is a major obstacle in the search for µ-variation via H2 lines [1,2].

The present study provides the ingredients to make the CO A-X system operational for detecting µ variation from quasar absorption spectra. In order to extract bounds on ∆µ/µ at the competitive level of < 10⁻⁵ a laboratory wavelength data set at an accuracy of ∆λ/λ = 3 × 10⁻⁷ is required. The A1Π - X1Σ+ absorption system has been investigated over decades, with an important comprehensive study by Field et al. [24], resulting in the...
FIG. 1: Recording of the jet absorption spectrum of $^{12}$C$^{16}$O with the Fourier-transform vacuum ultraviolet spectrometer at the SOLEIL synchrotron. (a) Overview spectra; (b) Detail spectrum of the A-X (0,0) band. The line indicated by an (*) is a Xe absorption line used for absolute calibration.

II. FOURIER TRANSFORM SPECTROSCOPY

The unique vacuum-ultraviolet (VUV) Fourier-transform spectrometer (FTS) of the VUV DESIRS beamline at the SOLEIL synchrotron, which is based on wavefront division interferometry, was employed to record high-resolution absorption spectra of CO in the range 130 – 160 nm. The setup was optimized for obtaining spectra at the highest resolution: a molecular slit jet was used to reduce the Doppler width, and the FTS was set to its lowest linewidth of 0.075 cm$^{-1}$, corresponding to a resolving power of about 900000. In Fig. 1 an overview spectrum, as well as a detail spectrum is presented showing sharp lines in the A$^1\Pi$-X$^3\Sigma^+$ (0,0) band at a linewidth of 0.09 cm$^{-1}$. Wavelength calibration of the FTS spectrum is derived from the scan-controlling He-Ne laser and further optimized for the absolute scale referencing to a Xenon line at 68.045.156 (3) cm$^{-1}$, which is based on accurate relative measurements and the measurement of a VUV anchor line. Based on these calibration procedures the uncertainty in the line positions of most CO resonances is estimated to be within 0.01 cm$^{-1}$, corresponding to $\Delta \lambda/\lambda = 1.5 \times 10^{-7}$. Resulting transition frequencies for the CO A-X ($v$,0) bands are listed in Table I. When comparing the results from this high-resolution VUV-FTS study with the classical spectral data, we find an offset of ~0.03 cm$^{-1}$ between the data sets. These offsets are found to be in agreement with those of Drabbels et al. for the four levels studied.

III. UV LASER SPECTROSCOPY

In addition two-photon excitation studies on the CO A$^1\Pi$-X$^3\Sigma^+$ system were performed employing a pulsed dye amplifier (PDA)-laser, injection-seeded by the output of a continuous-wave ring dye laser, delivering narrowband output at ~300 nm. Simultaneous recording of I$_2$ hyperfine lines and transmission peaks from a stabilized etalon using the fundamental wavelength provides frequency calibration. The excitation was performed in a counter-propagating beam geometry to suppress Doppler effects. In a 2+1 resonance-enhance multi-photon ionization (REMPI) scheme a second laser at 207 nm is employed for ionizing the A$^1\Pi$ excited state population; this laser is pulse delayed by ~10 ns with respect to the first laser pulse to avoid AC-Stark effects by the ionizing laser pulse. Delayed pulsed-electric-field ion extraction is also employed to minimize DC-Stark effects. Figure 2 shows a recording of an excitation spectrum of part of the A-X (0,0) band. Due to availability and wavelength tunability of the ring dye laser the laser studies were performed on the A-X (1,0) and (0,0) bands.

The error budget in Table II lists the estimate of uncertainty contributions from various sources. AC-Stark shift corrections were obtained from intensity-dependent measurements and extrapolating the transition frequencies to zero intensity levels. The accuracy of the obtained transition frequencies from the laser measurements are limited by the frequency chirp in the PDA-laser. Based on previous characterization of the chirp of our PDA system, we estimate a 60 MHz contribution from the chirp for this study since a lower-order frequency upconversion of the laser was used. Furthermore, the measurements were performed at lower PDA-pump energies compared to Ref. [32], which also reduce the chirp effect. We estimate the uncertainty of the line frequencies from the PDA investigation to be 70 MHz or 0.002 cm$^{-1}$.
In view of parity selection rules in the two-photon laser experiment opposite parity Λ-doublet components in the A\(^1\Pi\) state are excited, when compared to the one-photon absorption experiment. Accurate values for the A\(^1\Pi\) Λ-doublet splittings can be deduced from measurements in the S, Q, R and P branches (the O branch was not recorded), and from the accurately known ground state level energies. Based on this analysis the laser data were converted to transition frequencies for one-photon A-X bands at an accuracy of 0.002 cm\(^{-1}\), and listed in Table [2].

The results from the laser-based study serve a two-fold purpose. First, they provide a reliable database for comparison with quasar data at the level of \(\Delta \lambda/\lambda = 3 \times 10^{-8}\) for the A-X (0,0) and (1,0) bands. Second, a comparison between the present laser data and the VUV-FTS data show agreement between both data sets at a statistical uncertainty within 0.01 cm\(^{-1}\). Hence, we conclude that the calibration procedures on the VUV-FTS spectra yield transition frequencies within the estimated uncertainty of 0.01 cm\(^{-1}\). This provides a database of CO A-X lines for bands \((v = 2 - 8)\) at \(\Delta \lambda/\lambda = 1.5 \times 10^{-7}\) accuracy. A slightly worse uncertainty estimate of 0.02 cm\(^{-1}\) is quoted for the (9,0) band which has worse SNR compared to the other bands due to its lower transition strengths.

### IV. Sensitivity Coefficients

For extracting a possible variation of the proton-to-electron mass ratio \(\mu\) a set of highly redshifted wave-
electron mass ratio is defined as $\Delta \equiv \mu_z - \mu_0$, meaning that a positive value for $\Delta\mu/\mu$ indicates a larger value of $\mu$ in the cosmological past.

Rovibrational level energies $E(v, J)$ can be expressed in terms of a Dunham expansion

$$E(v, J) = \sum_{k,l} Y_{k,l} \left( v + \frac{1}{2} \right)^k [J(J + 1) - \Lambda^2]^l$$

with $Y_{k,l}$ the Dunham coefficients, known to sufficient accuracy for the $X^1\Sigma^+$ state [88] and for the $A^1\Pi$ state [39]. $\Lambda$ represents the electronic angular momentum, $\Lambda = 0$ for $X^1\Sigma^+$ and $\Lambda = 1$ for $A^1\Pi$. The advantage of the Dunham representation of molecular states is that the coefficients scale as $Y_{k,l} \propto \mu^{-l-k/2}$, with $\mu_{red}$ the reduced mass of the molecule. In studies focusing on $\mu$-variation it is assumed that all atomic masses scale as the proton, i.e. protons and neutrons treated equally, hence $\mu_{red}$ can be replaced by $\mu$ in this analysis [8, 40]. Hence the derivatives for the level energies can be analytically taken with

$$\frac{dY_{k,l}}{d\mu} \approx -\frac{Y_{k,l}}{\mu} \left( l + \frac{k}{2} \right)$$

Substitution in Eqs. (3) and (2) then straightforwardly yields the sensitivity coefficients $K_{\mu}$ for the $\Lambda$-$X$ lines of CO.

Interactions of the $A^1\Pi$ state with triplet states in the CO molecule perturb the level structure [24]. The level shifts play an important role in the comparative analysis of quasar data to extract $\mu$ variation, but these are implicitly included in the experimental determination of spectral line positions, i.e. in the values of Table I. However, in the calculation of $K_{\mu}$ coefficients the admixtures of perturbing character into the wave function composition in $A^1\Pi$ states should also be accounted for. In Refs. [8, 40] a model is proposed to calculate the $K_{\mu}$ coefficients in the case of non-adiabatic mixing between $\Sigma$ and $\Pi$ states [39]. The advantage of the Dunham representation is that the coefficients depend on both the amount of admixture in the perturbing state in the wave function, as well as on the value of the $K_{\mu}$ coefficients for the pure perturber state.

$$K_{\mu} = \alpha_{pert} K_{pert} + \sum \alpha_{pert} K_{pert}$$

where $K_{pert}$ refers to $K_{\mu}$ coefficients for transitions of the state in consideration and $K_{pert}$ refer to those of the perturbing states, while $\alpha$ refers to the admixture in the wave function composition (given in Ref. [20]).

Perturbation-corrected $K_{\mu}$ coefficients were calculated using Dunham representations for the perturbing $d^3\Delta$ state from Ref. [41], and $e^3\Sigma^-$, $1^1\Sigma^-$, $a^3\Sigma^+$ states from Ref. [42], (we have collected the Dunham coefficients in the Supplementary material [43]). The second-order mass-dependent effect (adiabatic correction) is estimated to be at the $5 \times 10^{-5}$ level and has been neglected.

As follows from Eq. (3) the correction to the $K_{\mu}$ coefficients depends on both the amount of admixture of the perturbing state in the wave function, as well as on the value of the $K_{\mu}$ coefficients for the pure perturber state. The most pronounced perturbation occurs between $A^1\Pi$ ($v = 1$) and $d^3\Delta$ ($v = 5$) with the highest triplet admixture of 17% for the $J' = 1$ state. In addition, the
perturber $K_\mu$ value is more than four times that of the pure A state value, resulting in a correction of 55% to the $K_\mu$ value compared to the case when the perturbation is not included. The A$^1\Pi$ ($v = 0$) state is only very slightly perturbed by the $d_3\Delta$ ($v = 3$, $4$) states with 0.13% wave function admixture. However, the perturber $K_\mu$ is 10 times larger than that of the pure A state value, resulting in 1.5% correction for $K_\mu$. The A$^1\Pi$ ($v = 4$) rotational states can have $K_\mu$-corrections up to 5%, while the A$^1\Pi$ ($v = 6$, $J = 8$) rotational state correction is almost 10%. The rest of the bands have $K_\mu$-corrections that are less than 1%. The $K_\mu$ coefficients are represented graphically in Fig. 3, where the scatter in the ($v = 1$, $4$ and $6$) bands show the effect of perturbations. The resulting $K_\mu$ coefficients are listed in Table III. The accuracies in these $K_\mu$ coefficients are estimated to be better than 1%, with the dominant uncertainty contributions from the perturbations (non-adiabatic corrections) which depends on the quantum numbers $v'$, $J'$ of the upper state.
V. DISCUSSIONS

$K_\mu$ coefficients for CO A-X are thus found in the range of values -0.002 to +0.066 giving a spread equal to that of the Lyman and Werner bands of H$_2$. This makes the A-X system of CO a good search ground for putting constraints on a possible variation of $\mu$, in particular at look-back times of 9.5-11.5 billion years where these features have been detected so far [19-22]. A set of zero-rest frame wavelengths of A-X ($v = 0 - 9.0$) bands has been measured with most transitions at an accuracy of $\Delta\lambda/\lambda = 1.5 \times 10^{-7}$, and for the (0,0) and (1,0) bands even as accurate as $3 \times 10^{-8}$. The combined data sets of rest-frame wavelengths and sensitivity coefficients are the basis for a $\mu$-variation analysis on CO spectra from high-redshift galaxies, where the analysis will be solely constrained by the quality of the astronomical data. So far six high redshift galaxies have been observed with characteristic CO A-X features. The best example is that of a CO spectrum observed at $z = 2.69$ with a column density of $\log N$(CO) = 14.17 cm$^{-2}$ in the sight-line of the Q1237+064 quasar system, showing a signal-to-noise ratio of 10-40 (over the wavelength range) and resolution $R \sim 50000$ after 8 hrs observation at the ESO Very Large Telescope [21]. Extended observations with attached Th-Ar calibration of the astronomical exposures (not available yet for the discovery spectrum of Ref. [21]) would result in a competitive result on $\Delta\mu/\mu$ from the CO spectra, i.e. an estimated constraint at $\Delta\mu/\mu < 10^{-5}$. The objects where CO is detected exhibit large column densities of H$_2$ and HD molecules, since extragalactic abundance ratios are generally $N$(H$_2$)/$N$(CO) $> 10^4$ and $N$(HD)/$N$(CO) $\sim 1$. Hence, future comprehensive $\mu$ constraining analyses can be performed from the features of all three molecules contained in the same quasar spectrum. In view of the increased number of spectral lines, the wider wavelength coverage, and the CO lines lying outside the Lyman-$\alpha$ forest, well-calibrated (Th-Ar attached) and good signal-to-noise observations (SNR $\geq 40$) should lead to constraints at $\Delta\mu/\mu < 3 \times 10^{-6}$. The system Q1237+064 would be the first target of choice.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

We have identified the $A^1\Pi - X^1\Sigma^+$ band system of carbon monoxide a novel probe system to search for possible variations of the proton-electron mass ratio ($\mu$) on cosmological time scales. Laboratory wavelengths of the spectral lines of the A-X ($v,0$) bands for $v = 0 - 9$ have been determined at an accuracy of $\Delta\lambda/\lambda = 1.5 \times 10^{-7}$ through VUV Fourier-transform absorption spectroscopy, providing a comprehensive and accurate zero-redshift data set. Two-photon Doppler-free laser spectroscopy has been applied for the (0,0) and (1,0) bands, achieving $3 \times 10^{-8}$ accuracy level. Accurate sensitivity coefficients $K_\mu$ for a varying $\mu$ have been calculated for the CO A-X bands, where the effect of perturbations have been accounted for. It is expected that future $\mu$ constraining analyses that include H$_2$ and HD and CO transitions from the same absorber should result in a more accurate and robust constraint for $\Delta\mu/\mu$.

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[43] See Supplementary Material at [URL to be inserted by publisher] for further details.
Supplementary Information for
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E. J. Salumbides,1,2 M. L. Niu,1 J. Bagdonaitė,1 N. de Oliveira,3 D. Joyeux,3 L. Nahon,3 and W. Ubachs1

1Department of Physics and Astronomy, and LaserLaB, VU University, De Boelelaan 1081, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2Department of Physics, University of San Carlos, Cebu City 6000, Philippines
3Synchrotron Soleil, Orme des Merisiers, St Aubin BP 48, 91192, GIF sur Yvette cedex, France
Table I. Dunham coefficients $Y_{kl}$ for the states of $^{12}$C$^{16}$O involved in the present analysis: the $X^1\Sigma^+$ ground state, the $A^3\Pi$ excited state and the perturber states. The constants were obtained from [1], [2], [3], and [4] respectively. All values in cm$^{-1}$.

| $Y_{kl}$ | $X^1\Sigma^+$ | $A^3\Pi$ | $a^3\Sigma^+$ | $a^3\Sigma^+$ | $I^1\Sigma^+$ |
|---------|---------------|-----------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1       | 0.2169813079E+04 | 0.1518240E+04 | 0.12286E+04   | 0.109222E+04  |               |
| 2       | -0.1328795957E+02 | -0.970E+01    | -0.10686E+02  | -0.10468E+02  | -0.10704E+02  |
| 3       | 0.104144739E-01  | 0.76584E-00   |               |               |               |
| 4       | 0.6921598529E-04 | -0.14117E-00  |               |               |               |
| 5       | 0.1657890319E-06 | 0.1434E-01    |               |               |               |
| 6       | 0.2466226718E-08 | -0.8051E-03   |               |               |               |
| 7       | -0.8630071431E-09| 0.236E-04     |               |               |               |
| 8       | 0.1261536024E-10 | -0.29E-06     |               |               |               |
| 9       | -0.8363842345E-13|               |               |               |               |
| 10      | 0.1931280862E+01 | 0.16115E+00   | 0.12836E+01   | 0.13446E+01   | 0.12705E+01   |
| 11      | -0.1750410155E-01| -0.23251E-01  | -0.1753E-01   | -0.1892E-01   | -0.1848E-01   |
| 12      | 0.5422101371E-06 | 0.15911E-02   |               |               |               |
| 13      | 0.1311844382E-07 | -0.57160E-03  |               |               |               |
| 14      | 0.1401093763E-08 | 0.82417E-04   |               |               |               |
| 15      | -0.5329007745E-11| -0.59413E-05  |               |               |               |
| 16      | -0.1434127145E-11| 0.21149E-06   |               |               |               |
| 17      | -0.2991E-08      |               |               |               |               |
| 18      | -0.6120747566E-05| -0.60E-05     | -0.677E-05    | -0.641E-05    | -0.90E-5      |
| 19      | 0.9449843095E-09 |               |               |               |               |
| 20      | -0.1430768382E-09|               |               |               |               |
| 21      | -0.2927592559E-11|               |               |               |               |
| 22      | 0.1660533203E-12 |               |               |               |               |
| 23      | -0.4714582132E-14|               |               |               |               |
| 24      | 0.5555386989E-11 |               |               |               |               |
| 25      | -0.1512467372E-12|               |               |               |               |
| 26      | -0.1471295100E-14|               |               |               |               |

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