Detection of the linear radical HC$_4$N in IRC+10216

J. Cernicharo$^1$, M. Guélin$^2$ and J.R. Pardo$^1$

cerni@damir.iem.csic.es, guelin@iram.fr, pardo@damir.iem.csic.es

ABSTRACT

We report the detection of the linear radical HC$_4$N in the C-rich envelope of IRC+10216. After HCCN (Guélin and Cernicharo 1991), HC$_4$N is the second member of the allenic chain family HC$_{2n}$N observed in space. The column density of HC$_4$N is found to be 1.5 $10^{12}$ cm$^{-2}$. The abundance ratio HC$_2$N/HC$_4$N is 9, a factor of two larger than the decrement observed for the cyanopolyynes (HC$_{2n+1}$N/HC$_{2n+3}$N). Linear HC$_4$N has a $^3\Sigma$ electronic ground state and is one of the 3 low-energy isomeric forms of this molecule. We have searched for the bent and ringed HC$_4$N isomers, but could only derive an upper limit to their column densities $\leq 3 \times 10^{12}$ cm$^{-2}$ (at 3-$\sigma$).

Subject headings: Astrochemistry —line: identification— ISM: molecules— radio lines: ISM, star— circumstellar matter — stars: AGB and post-AGB, individual (IRC+10216)

1. Introduction

The detection of long linear carbon-chain molecules in interstellar and circumstellar clouds has come as a surprise. Ab initio calculation show that long linear species are usually more energetic than their ring or ring-chain isomers and are observed to be less stable in the earthbound environment. Yet many linear chains, such as the cyanopolyynes HC$_{2n+1}$N, are found to be widespread and abundant in the cold circumstellar and interstellar clouds. This abundance of long chains and the scarcity of rings in the cold UV-shielded clouds yield keys to the formation of large molecules in interstellar space and, may be, can help us to understand to the origin of the diffuse interstellar bands (Tulej et al. 1998; Maier, Walker and Bohlender 2004).

$^1$Dpt. Molecular and Infrared Astrophysics (DAMIR). IEM-CSIC. C/Serrano 121. 28006 Madrid. Spain

$^2$IRAM. 300 rue de la Piscine. F-38406 St. Martin d’Hères. France
Carbon chain molecules can be classified into several families, depending on the structure of their linear backbone (acetylenic backbone with alternating single and triple carbon-carbon bonds, or cumulenic backbone with double bonds), on their electronic ground state (open shell or closed shell) and on their end groups (H, CN, CH₂ or CH₃). The two most widespread families are the polyyynes (HC₂n+1N and CH₃C₂n+1H) and the polyacetylenic radicals (CₙH). The most abundant is presumably the family of polyacetylenes (HC₂nH), which, unfortunately are non-polar, hence not detectable at radio wavelengths. Note, however, that these species have been detected in the mid infrared with the Infrared Space Observatory (Cernicharo et al. 2001a,b).

It has been proposed that the polyyynes and carbon-chain radicals form directly in the gas phase through reactions of CCH with polyyynes, polyacetylenes and/or polyacetylenic ions (e.g. HC₂n+1N + CCH → HC₂n+3N + H) (Herbst 1989; Cherchneff, Glassglod and Mamon 1993; Millar, Herbst and Bettens 2000). Such reactions tend to insert two triply bonded carbon atoms into the carbon backbone, uncoupling the formation of chains with an odd number of C-atoms from those with an even number, which could explain the alternance between high and low abundances observed as the length of the C backbone increases. For example, in the molecular shell around IRC+10216 and in the dark cloud TMC1, the two main astronomical sources of carbon chain molecules, the abundance of the CₙH radicals with an even number of C-atoms is ≃ 30 times larger than that of radicals of similar size with an odd number of carbon atoms. In contrast, the abundance decrement between successive species within the even (or odd) number of C-atoms families, CₙH/Cₙ₊₂H, is found to be only 4-6 (Cernicharo et al. 1987; Guélin and Cernicharo 1991).

The same seems to apply to the chains terminated by CN: the abundance decrement between cyanopolyyynes, HC₂n+1N/HC₂n+3N, is between 3 and 5 (for n=1-4), whereas HCCN, the first member of the ‘even’ chain family, is found to be ≃ 200 times less abundant than HC₃N (Guélin and Cernicharo 1991). So far, this similarity between polyyynes and carbon chains, could not be further explored as no other member of the HC₂nN was observed in space. In this Letter, we report the detection in IRC+10216 of the next member of this family, HC₄N, and show that the HCCN/HC₄N abundance ratio is 20 times smaller than the HC₃N/HCCN ratio.

2. Observations

Contrary to cyanopolyyynes which are linear and have ¹Σ electronic ground states, the lowest energy form of HCCN is a quasi-linear triplet (Saito et al. 1984, Rice and Schaeffer 1987). Similarly, ab initio calculations (Ikuta, Tsuboi and Aoki 2000; Aoki and Ikuta
1993; Aoki, Ikuta and Murakami 1993) predict that one of the 3 low-energy isomers of 
HC$_4$N is a linear triplet with a $^3\Sigma$ ground state (hereafter HC$_4$N, see Fig. 1), the other 
two being a C$_3$-ring (c$_3$-HC$_4$N) and a bent carbene structure (b-HC$_4$N). The 3 isomers have 
been recently observed in the laboratory (Tang, Sumiyoshi and Endo 1999; McCarthy et 
al. 1999a,b); their microwave spectra are now fully characterized, opening the way to 
unambiguous identification in astronomical sources.

The astronomical observations were carried out between 1995 and 2003 using the 30-m 
IRAM radiotelescope at Pico Veleta, Sierra Nevada (Spain). Most of the data were taken 
during a sensitive 3-mm wavelength (80-115 GHz) line survey of IRC+10216, which has an 
r.m.s. noise of few mK per 1 MHz-wide channel. These data were complemented in August 
2003 with more sensitive observations at the frequencies of SiNC (Guélin et al. 2004).

We detected a number of U-lines, 9 of which could be grouped into 3 close triplets 
with similar line intensities. The center frequencies of the triplets were harmonically related, 
implying a common linear carrier with a rotation constant $B_0 = 2302$ MHz. The rotation 
constant suggested a molecule similar to C$_5$H ($B_0 = 2287$ MHz) and the triplet structure an 
even number of electrons. This pointed out to HC$_4$N, and we could quickly check that the 
frequencies of our 9 U-lines agreed with those predicted from the spectroscopic constants of 
Tang, Sumiyoshi and Endo (1999). That HC$_4$N was the carrier of our new lines was definitely 
confirmed when we succeeded in detecting a fourth line triplet (see Fig. 2e and Table 1), 
during a dedicated search made in October 2003.

The observations were made in the wobbling mode, with the secondary nutating at a 
rate of 0.5 Hz, in order to achieve very flat baselines (see Fig. 2 and below). Only a zero-
order baseline with an offset of $\approx 40$ mK, corresponding to the thermal dust emission of the 
circumstellar envelope, has been removed from the spectra. Two SIS 3-mm receivers, with 
orthogonal polarizations and system temperatures of 100 – 130 K, were used in parallel with 
two 1.3-mm receivers. The 3-mm data were co-added, so increasing the effective integration 
time and decreasing the r.m.s. noise. In the case of our best spectrum (Fig. 2a), the 
effective integration time and noise temperature were equal to 52 h and 0.5 mK per 1-MHz 
wide channel, respectively.

The temperature scale was calibrated with the help of two absorbers, respectively at 
room and liquid nitrogen temperature, using the atmosphere transparency model ATM de-
veloped by Cernicharo (1985) currently installed in the 30-m telescope on-line calibration 
software (see also Pardo, Cernicharo and Serabyn 2001). Pointing and focus were regularly 
checked on planets and on the strong nearby quasar OJ 287. Between the pointing sessions, 
we monitored the shapes of the strong lines that were observed in parallel with the 1.3-mm 
receivers. The cusped shapes and the line horn-to-center intensity ratios depend indeed crit-
ically on the accuracy of the telescope pointing and focus. Thanks to these precautions, the intensities of the lines observed several times in the 1995-2003 period were found constant within 10%.

3. Results and Discussion

Figure 2 shows the spectra covering the 4 triplets, which correspond to 4 successive rotational transitions of HC$_4$N (from N=18 → 17 to 21 → 20). The spectrum centered at 82.9 GHz, which was observed while searching for SiCN (Guélin et al. 2000), SiNC (Guélin et al. 2004) and HCCN, is shown twice in this figure: full scale, i.e. from 82650 MHz to 83150 MHz (Fig. 2a) and half-scale, around the HC$_4$N N=18→17 triplet (Fig. 2b). The r.m.s. noise in this 1 MHz resolution spectrum is only 0.5 mK, which makes it one of the most sensitive spectra ever obtained with the 30-m telescope.

Forty spectral lines are detected in Fig. 2a. Most are weak and partly blended. The blended lines are easily resolved, thanks to their characteristic cusps, sharp edges and constant width in velocity (this shape results from the uniform expansion of the outer circumstellar envelope). We can identify almost 60% of these lines with the help of the molecular line catalog maintained by one of us (JC) and described in Cernicharo, Guélin and Kahane (2000). The catalog contains the mm transitions of some 1200 different molecular species. Of the remaining 40% unidentified lines, at least half could be tentatively assigned to some heavy species (see below). The carriers of the unambiguously identified lines are mostly $^{12}$C and $^{13}$C isotopomers of long carbon chain molecules (C$_4$H, C$_7$H, C$_8$H, H$_2$C$_3$, H$_2$C$_4$, and HC$_5$N), as well as silicon compounds, such as SiC$_4$, SiCN, and SiNC. For the first time, we detect a doubly-substituted $^{13}$C isotopomer of cyanoacetylene: H$^{13}$C$^{13}$CCN (see Fig2e, 96623 MHz; several lines of the three doubly-substituted $^{13}$C isotopomers of HC$_3$N have been detected in our 3mm line survey of IRC+10216).

The number of unidentified lines at the 3 mK level detected in the 4 frequency bands is $\approx$15 lines/GHz. Several of these lines probably arise from vibrationally excited C$_5$H and C$_6$H and their $^{13}$C isotopomers, species for which we have no accurate laboratory frequencies (for example, U82924 and/or U82938 and U82995 could well correspond to the $J = 61/2 \rightarrow 59/2$ lines of $^2\Pi_{1/2}$ CCCCC$^{13}$CH; U82677, U82737, U92034 and U92045 could correspond to different $\Sigma$ and $\Pi$ vibronic states of the lowest energy bending mode of C$_6$H). Others probably come from $^{13}$C and $^{29}$Si isotopomers of SiC$_4$ (for example the J=29-28 and J=32-31 lines of $^{29}$SiC$_4$ at 87588 and 96648 MHz respectively and the J=27-26 line of SiC$^{13}$CCC at 82704 MHz). Finally, some unidentified lines are close to transition frequencies predicted for SiC$_5$ (U82746, U82876 and U82995), C$_5$S (U83038) and KCN (for which we have detected several
additional lines that will be published elsewhere), and C₅H (U83011). Obviously, the U-line density is too high at present to claim the detection of any of these species, which all have a rich mm spectrum, on the basis of just one, two, or even three weak lines.

The HC₄N lines shown in Fig. 2 are cusped (see in particular Fig. 2a, where the lines have the highest signal-to-noise ratio). This implies that this molecule is mostly confined into the outer part of the circumstellar envelope, presumably in the 15"-radius hollow shell where most of the free radicals and carbon chains are found (Guélin, Lucas and Cernicharo 1993). From the intensities of the four triplets we derive a rotational temperature of 25±4 K, close to that derived for HC₃N.

The permanent dipole moment of HC₄N has been calculated by Ikuta, Tsuboi and Aoki (2000) to be 4.3 D. Using this value and assuming thermal equilibrium at 25 K, we derive a column density for HC₄N of 1.5×10^{12} cm^{-2}.

We have re-calculated the rotation temperature and the abundance of HCCN by adding to the 2-mm lines reported by Guélin and Cernicharo (1991) the lines observed in our new 3-mm survey. We find a rotational temperature of 15±2 K, slightly higher than our previous estimate (12±2 K). The HCCN lines are also cusped and the HCCN column density, assuming a dipole moment of 3 D (Guélin and Cernicharo 1991), is 1.4×10^{13} cm^{-2}. We note that the increase in rotation temperature between HCCN and HC₄N is not surprising as a similar increase is observed between the cyanopolyynes HC₃N and HC₅N.

The HCCN/HC₄N abundance ratio is found equal to 9. This is about twice the decrement observed between the successive members of the cyanopolyynes family, HC₃N/HC₅N, but 20–40 times less than the HC₃N/HCCN (≃ 200) and HC₅N/HC₄N (400) abundance ratios, which confirms that, like the carbon chain radicals, the even and odd HCN families have parallel, but distinct formation paths. We have also searched in our 3mm line survey for the linear triplet HC₆N, but without success. The 3σ upper limit to the column density of this species, assuming a rotation temperature of 25 K, is 1×10^{13} cm^{-2}, not low enough to constrain significantly the HC₄N/HC₆N ratio, but already 25 times lower than the HC₇N column density (Cernicharo et al. 1987).

As noted above, the carbon chain molecules C_{2n+1}N and HC_{2n+1}N are thought to be formed in IRC+10216 from the reaction of radicals such as CCH and CN with carbon-chain molecules or radicals (Cherchneff, Glassgold and Mamon 1993; Millar, Herbst and Bettens 2000). Similarly, we could consider that HC₄N may form through the reaction of C₅N and C₃H with HCN and CH₂, e.g., C₃H + HCN → HC₄N + H, or may be C₃N + CH₂ → HC₄N + H. All the reactants are relatively abundant in the outer layers of the circumstellar envelope and we expect, by analogy with similar reactions studied in the laboratory, that at least one
of these reactions could proceed rapidly.

Another path proposed for the formation of cyanopolyynes involves ion-molecule reactions yielding \( \text{H}_2\text{C}_n\text{N}^+ \) or \( \text{H}_2\text{C}_n\text{N}^+ \), followed by the dissociative recombination of these ions (Glassgold, Lucas and Omont 1986; Howe and Millar 1990). The low abundance of ions in IRC+10216 makes this path relatively slow (Cherchneff, Glassgold and Mamon 1993). Moreover, in the case of HCCN and HC\(_4\)N, the reaction of HCN with CH\(_3\)\(^+\), leading to H\(_2\)C\(_2\)N\(^+\) + H\(_2\) (or H\(_3\)C\(_2\)N\(^+\) + H), does not proceed (Guélin and Cernicharo 1991), making the ion-molecule path even slower and less likely than in the case of cyanopolyynes.

Finally, a last process, formation on dust grains followed by photodesorption when the grains reach the outer envelope layers, has been advocated in the case of IRC+10216 (Guélin, Lucas and Cernicharo 1993). Such a mechanism may well produce HCCN, HC\(_4\)N, and the cyanopolyynes observed in the outer shell, but would provide no simple explanation to why the abundance decrement within each family seems to be so constant.

The HC\(_4\)N lines detected during this study belong to the linear triplet isomer. We have unsuccessfully searched for the singlet bent HC\(_4\)N isomer and for the \( c_3 \)-ring cyclic isomer. Those latter have a permanent dipole moment almost as large as the linear isomer: 2.96D (\( \mu_a=2.9 \) D, \( \mu_b=0.5 \) D) and 3.48 D (\( \mu_a=3.15 \) D, \( \mu_b=1.49 \) D), respectively, versus 4.3 D for linear HC\(_4\)N (McCarthy et al. 1999a,b; Ikuta, Tsuboi and Aoki 2000). The upper limits to the column density of these species are \( \approx 3 \times 10^{12} \) cm\(^{-2}\), assuming the same rotational temperature than for linear triplet HC\(_4\)N (25 K).

The most accurate calculations of the HC\(_4\)N structure to date (level CCSD(T)/cc-pCVTZ) predict that the singlet ring isomer of HC\(_4\)N lies 4.2 Kcal/mol below the linear triplet isomer (Ikuta, Tsuboi and Aoki 2000). If this result is confirmed, the non-detection of the ringed isomer (and of the bent isomer) would further stress the discrimination against ringed structures already noted in the case of carbon chain radicals.

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Table 1: Observed HC$_3$N line parameters

| Obs. Freq. MHz | Calc. Freq. MHz | Transition (N,J→N’,J’) | $\int T_A^*dv$ mK.kms$^{-1}$ |
|---------------|----------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 82855.6(6)   | 82855.52       | 18 17 -17 16           | 110(20)                     |
| 82884.1(10)$^b$ | 82883.57      | 18 18 -17 17           | 94(14)                      |
| 82905.4(3)   | 82905.41       | 18 19 -17 18           | 86(10)                      |
| 87463.5(10)$^b$ | 87463.15      | 19 18 -18 17           | 127(35)                     |
| 87487.9(10)  | 87487.87       | 19 19 -18 18           | 135(35)                     |
| 87507.6(5)   | 87507.31       | 19 20 -18 19           | 142(20)                     |
| 92070.0(10)$^b$ | 92070.22      | 20 19 -19 18           | 90(24)                      |
| 92092.4(10)  | 92092.13       | 20 20 -19 19           | 105(24)                     |
| 92109.2(6)   | 92109.48       | 20 21 -19 20           | 90(18)                      |
| 96677.1(5)   | 96676.82       | 21 20 -20 19           | 75(15)                      |
| 96696.0(10)$^b$ | 96696.32      | 21 21 -20 20           | 100(23)                     |
| 96712.1(5)   | 96711.88       | 21 22 -20 21           | 75(15)                      |

Table 1: The number in parenthesis are 1σ uncertainties on the last digit, derived from least square fits; they do not include the 5% calibration uncertainty. $^b$ denotes a partly blended line. The frequencies in col. 2 are calculated from the spectroscopic constants measured by Tang, Sumiyoshi and Endo (1999) in the laboratory.

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Fig. 1.— The three isomers of HC$_4$N considered in this paper. The structures are taken from McCarthy et al. (1999b) and Ikuta, Tsuboi and Aoki (2000). Isomer A is linear triplet HC$_4$N ($^{3}\Sigma$)), isomer B corresponds to the C$_3$-ring structure (c$_3$-HC$_4$N), and isomer C is the singlet bent HC$_4$N (b-HC$_4$N).
Fig. 2.— Four spectra observed toward IRC+10216 with the IRAM 30-m telescope, centered on the \( N=18-17 \) through \( 21-20 \) rotational transitions of \( \text{HC}_4\)N. The intensity scale is \( T_A^* \), the spectral resolution 1 MHz. The r.m.s. noise in the upper spectrum is 0.5 mK.