A New Exact Method for Line Radiative Transfer

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Submitted August 8, 2005; accepted October 20, 2005

ABSTRACT

We present a new method, the Coupled Escape Probability (CEP), for exact calculation of line emission from multi-level systems, solving only algebraic equations for the level populations. The CEP formulation of the classical two-level problem is a set of linear equations, and we uncover an exact analytic expression for the emission from two-level optically thick sources that holds as long as they are in the “effectively thin” regime. In comparative study of a number of standard problems, the CEP method outperformed the leading line transfer methods by substantial margins.

The algebraic equations employed by our new method are already incorporated in numerous codes based on the escape probability approximation. All that is required for an exact solution with these existing codes is to augment the expression for the escape probability with simple zone-coupling terms. As an application, we find that standard escape probability calculations generally produce the correct cooling emission by the \(\text{CII} 158 \mu m\) line but not by the \(3\text{P}\) lines of \(\text{OI}\).

Key words: radiative transfer — line: formation — methods: numerical — ISM: lines and bands

1 INTRODUCTION

Much of the information about astronomical sources comes from spectral lines, requiring reliable analysis of multi-level line emission. Most current methods for exact solutions involve accelerated \(\Lambda\)-iteration (ALI) techniques\(^1\) in which the radiation intensity is obtained from the repeated action of an operator designated \(\Lambda\) on the source function (e.g., Rybicki 1991, Hubeny 1992). The ALI method utilizing short characteristics with parabolic interpolation of the source function (hereafter SCP; Olson, Auer & Buchler 1986) is a standard against which the efficiency of other line transfer techniques can be measured.

Because of the complexity and computational demands of exact methods, many simulation codes that attempt to implement as many realistic physical ingredients as possible are altogether bypassing solution of the radiative transfer equation, employing instead the escape probability technique. In this approach only the level populations are considered, calculated from rate equations that include photon escape factors which are meant to account approximately for the effects of radiative transfer (see Dumont et al 2003 for a recent discussion and comparison with ALI calculations). Since this approach is founded on a plausibility assumption right from the start, its results amount to an uncontrolled approximation without any means for internal error estimates. Nevertheless, this inherent shortcoming is often tolerated because of the simplicity and usefulness of the escape probability approach.

We present here a new exact method, the Coupled Escape Probability (CEP), that retains all the advantages of the naïve escape probability approach. In this new technique the source is divided into zones, and formal level population equations that are fully consistent with radiative transfer are derived rigorously from first principles. Different zones are coupled through terms resembling standard escape probability expressions, resulting in a set of level population equations with non-linear coefficients. Solution of this set of coupled algebraic equations produces level populations that are self-consistent with the line radiation they generate. Any desired level of accuracy can be achieved by increasing the number of zones.

We introduce our new method in §2. In §3 we study the 2-level model in both a semi-infinite atmosphere and finite slabs, presenting results and comparison with SCP calculations. The new CEP method attains the exact solutions, outperforming the SCP method by substantial margins. We present the equations for multi-level systems in §4 and include as an example an application to the \(3\text{P}\) system of \(\text{OI}\). Section 5 contains a discussion that, among other things, covers various technical details.

2 THE NEW TECHNIQUE

Consider the transfer of a line with frequency \(\nu_0\). The dimensionless line profile is \(\Phi(x)\), normalized so that \(\int \Phi(x)dx = 1\), where

\(^1\) As noted by Trujillo Bueno & Fabiani Bendicho (1995), the ALI method is based on the Jacobi iteration (Jacobi 1845).
$x = (\nu - \nu_0)/\Delta \nu_D$ is the dimensionless frequency shift from line center and $\Delta \nu_D$ is the Doppler width. We consider here only the case of $\Phi(x)$ that does not change its shape throughout the source and frequency independent line source function $S$. These assumptions are adopted to simplify the presentation. They do not reflect inherent limitations of our new method.

### 2.1 Radiative Transfer

For the geometry we adopt a plane-parallel slab whose physical properties vary only perpendicular to the surface. Optical depth at frequency $\nu$ along a path orthogonal to the surface is $\tau_\nu = \tau \Phi(x)$, and $\tau$ can be used as a coordinate that uniquely specifies locations in the slab (see figure 1). The optical depth along a ray slanted at $\theta = \cos^{-1} \mu$ from normal is $\tau_\theta(\mu) = \tau \Phi(x)/\mu$, and the intensity along the ray obeys the radiative transfer equation

$$\frac{dI_\nu(\tau, \mu)}{d\tau} = \Phi(x)\left[S(\tau) - I_\nu(\tau, \mu)\right]$$

(1)

The equation for the flux $F_\nu = 2\pi \int I_\nu d\mu$ is obtained from integration over angles. The overall line flux $F = \int F_\nu d\nu$ obeys at every position in the slab

$$\frac{dF(\tau)}{d\tau} = 4\pi \Delta \nu_D \left[S(\tau) - \bar{J}(\tau)\right]$$

(2)

where

$$\bar{J}(\tau) = \int d\Omega \int I_\nu(\tau, \mu) \Phi(x) d\mu$$

(3)

is the intensity averaged over both angles and line profile. Denoting by $\tau_i$ the overall optical thickness and accounting for the emission from both faces of the slab, the line contribution to the cooling rate per unit area is

$$\Lambda = F(\tau_i) - F(0) = 4\pi \Delta \nu_D J$$

(4)

The line cooling factor $J$ is introduced for convenience when $\Delta \nu_D$ is constant in the slab. Integrating equation (2) over $\tau$ yields

$$J = \int_0^{\tau_i} S(\tau)p(\tau) d\tau$$

(5)

where we introduced

$$p(\tau) = 1 - \frac{\bar{J}(\tau)}{S(\tau)}$$

(6)

a quantity that has been called the net radiative bracket (Athay & Skumanich 1971). From the formal solution of the radiative transfer equation,

$$p(\tau) = 1 - \frac{1}{2S(\tau)} \int_0^{\tau} S(t) dt \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \Phi^2 d\phi \int_0^\infty e^{-|\tau-t|\Phi(\mu)/\mu} d\mu$$

(7)

when there is no external radiation entering the slab.

### 2.2 Level Populations

Denote by $n_k(\tau)$, with $k = 1, 2$, the populations per sub-state of a given transition at position $\tau$; that is, $n_k = N_k/g_k$ where $g_k$ is the level degeneracy and $N_k$ is the overall level population. Then the line source function is

$$S = \frac{A_{21}}{B_{21}} \frac{n_2}{n_1 - n_2}$$

(8)

where $A$ and $B$ are the Einstein coefficients of the transition. The populations are obtained from steady-state rate equations of the form $\sum R_{ij} = 0$. The term corresponding to exchanges between the transition levels, separated by $E_{21} = h\nu_0$, is

$$R_{21} = -A_{21} n_2 - B_{21} \bar{J}(n_2 - n_1) - C_{21} (n_2 - n_1 e^{-E_{21}/kT})$$

(9)

where $C$ is the collision rate; exchanges with other levels have similar form and are listed in [4].

### 2.3 Solution

The common approach of exact solution methods is to handle radiative transfer and the level population distribution as two distinct problems, coupled through the results each of them gives. The problem is initialized with populations (and the corresponding source functions) obtained in some limiting case, e.g., thermal equilibrium. With these populations, radiative transfer (eq. 1) is solved for the intensity to determine new populations, and as is evident from equations 7 and 8, the rate term can be written as

$$R_{21} = -A_{21} n_2 p - C_{21} \left(n_2 - n_1 e^{-E_{21}/kT}\right)$$

(10)

showing that the only radiative quantity actually needed for the calculation of level populations at every position is the net radiative bracket $p(\tau)$; given this factor we could compute the level populations that are consistent with the radiation they produce without solving for the intensity. And as is evident from equations 7 and 8 the factor $p(\tau)$ itself can be computed from the level populations, again without solving for the intensity. Therefore, inserting $p(\tau)$ from equation 7 into the rate terms (eq. 10) produces level population equations that properly account for all the effects of radiative transfer without actually calculating the intensity itself; the radiative transfer equation has been incorporated through its formal solution in equation 7.

A numerical solution of the resulting level population equations requires a spatial grid, partitioning the source into zones such that all properties can be considered uniform within each zone. The degree of actual deviations from uniformity, and the accuracy of the solution, can be controlled by decreasing each zone size through the

Figure 1. Top: Sketch of the slab geometry for the radiative transfer problem. Bottom: The partition of the slab into zones (see 2.3).
finer divisions with an increasing number of zones. Figure 4 shows the slab partitioning into zones. The $i$-th zone, $i = 1 \ldots z$, occupies the range $\tau_{i-1} < \tau \leq \tau_i$, with $\tau_0 = 0$ and $\tau_z = \tau$. The optical depth between any pair of zone boundaries is

$$\tau_{ij} = |\tau_i - \tau_j|$$

(11)

so that the optical thickness of the $i$-th zone is $\tau_{i,i-1}$. The temperature and collision rates are constant in the zone, and the corresponding rate term for its (constant) level populations is

$$R_{02i} = -A_{2i} n_{2i} p_i - C_{2i} (n_{i2} - n_{i1} e^{-E_{2i}/kT_i}),$$

(12)

where the superscript $i$ is used as a zone label. The factor $p(\tau)$ varies in the zone and has been replaced by a constant $p_i$ that should adequately represent its value there, for example $p_i = \frac{1}{2} [p(\tau_i) + p(\tau_{i-1})]$ or $p_i = p \left( \frac{1}{2} [\tau_i + \tau_{i-1}] \right)$. There are no set rules for this replacement other than it must obey $p_i \rightarrow p(\tau_i)$ when $\tau_{i,i-1} \rightarrow 0$. We choose for $p_i$ the zone average

$$p_i = \frac{1}{\tau_{i,i-1}} \int_{\tau_{i-1}}^{\tau_i} p(\tau) d\tau$$

(13)

and this choice proved to be very successful in our numerical calculations. From eq. 12 calculation of $p_i$ requires an integration over the entire slab, which can be broken into a sum of integrals over the zones. In each term of the sum, the zone source function can be pulled out of the $\tau$-integration so that

$$p_i = 1 - \frac{1}{2\tau_{i,i-1} S^i} \sum_{j=1}^{i} S_j \times$$

$$\int_{\tau_{i-1}}^{\tau_i} d\tau \int_{\tau_{j-1}}^{\tau_j} d\tau \int_0^{\infty} \Phi(x) dx \int_0^{\infty} 1 - e^{-(x+\mu)/\mu} d\mu$$

(14)

The remaining integrals can be expressed in terms of common functions. Consider for example

$$\beta^i = 1 - \frac{1}{2\tau_{i,i-1} S^i} \times$$

$$\int_{\tau_{i-1}}^{\tau_i} d\tau \int_{\tau_{j-1}}^{\tau_j} d\tau \int_0^{\infty} \Phi(x) dx \int_0^{\infty} e^{-x(S_j/\mu)} d\mu$$

(15)

the contribution of zone $j \neq i$ to itself to $p_i$. It is straightforward to show that $\beta^i = \beta(\tau_{i,i-1})$, where

$$\beta(\tau) = \frac{1}{\tau} \int_0^{\tau} dt \int_0^{\infty} \Phi(x) dx \int_0^{\infty} e^{-t x/\mu} d\mu$$

(16)

This function was first introduced by Capriotti (1965); it is the probability for photon escape from a slab of thickness $\tau$, averaged over the photon direction, frequency and position in the slab. The contribution of zone $j \neq i$ to the remaining sum can be handled similarly, and the final expression for the coefficient $p_i$ is

$$p_i = \beta^i + \frac{1}{2\tau_{i,i-1} S^i} \sum_{j=1}^{i} S_j M_{ij}$$

(17)

$$M_{ij} = -\frac{1}{2} [\alpha_{i-j} - \alpha_{i-1,j} - \alpha_{j-1,i} + \alpha_{i-1,j-1}]$$

(18)

and where $\alpha_{i,j} = \tau_{i,j} \beta(\tau_{i,j})$. The quantity $\alpha_{i,j}$ obeys $\alpha_{i,j} = \alpha_{j,i}$ and $\alpha_{i,i} = 0$, therefore $M_{ii} = M_{ji}$ and $M_{ii} = \alpha_{i-1,i}$. The first term in the expression for $p_i$ is the average probability for photon escape from zone $i$, reproducing one of the common variants of the escape probability method in which the whole slab is treated as a single zone (e.g., Krolik & McKee 1978). The subsequent sum describes the effect on the level populations in zone $i$ of radiation produced in all other zones. Each term in the sum has a simple interpretation in terms of the probability that photons generated elsewhere in the slab traverse every other zone and get absorbed in zone $i$, where their effect on the level populations is similar to that of radiation external to the slab (see appendix A).

Inserting the coefficients $p_i$ from eq. 17 into the rate terms (eq. 12) in every zone produces a set of non-linear algebraic equations for the unknown level populations $n_{i,k}$. The procedure was outlined here only for the diffuse radiation of a single transition; we describe the extension to multi-levels in appendix B and the inclusion of external radiation in appendix C. Solution of these equations yields the full solution of the line transfer problem by considering only level populations; the computed populations are self-consistent with their internally generated radiation even though the radiative transfer equation is not handled at all. Once the populations are found, radiative quantities can be calculated in a straightforward manner from summations over the zones. The emerging intensity at direction $\mu$ is

$$I_\nu(\tau, \mu) = \sum_{i=1}^{z} \left( e^{-\tau_{z,i-1} \Phi(\mu)} - e^{-\tau_{z,i-1} \Phi/\mu} \right) S^i \times$$

(19)

The flux density emerging from each face of the slab obeys

$$F_\nu(\tau_i) = 2\pi \sum_{i=1}^{z} \left( E_3(\tau_{z,i-1} \Phi) - E_3(\tau_{z,i-1} \Phi/\mu) \right) S^i$$

$$- F_\nu(0) = 2\pi \sum_{i=1}^{z} \left( E_3(\tau_{z,i-1} \Phi) - E_3(\tau_{z,i} \Phi) \right) S^i$$

(20)

where $E_3$ is the third exponential integral (e.g., Abramowitz & Stegun 1972). The line cooling coefficient is

$$J = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^{z} \left( \alpha_{i,0} - \alpha_{i-1,0} - \alpha_{z,i} + \alpha_{z,i-1} \right) S^i \times$$

(21)

The solution method just described is exact — the discretized equations are mathematically identical to the original ones when $\tau_{z,i-1} \rightarrow 0$ for every $i$. As is usually the case, the only approximation in actual numerical calculations is the finite size of the discretization, i.e., the finite number of zones. A desired accuracy is achieved when, upon further division, the relative change in all level populations is smaller than the prescribed tolerance.

2 Apruzese et al (1980) proposed somewhat similar equations. They based their arguments on probabilistic reasoning and did not offer a formal derivation. We thank P. Lockett for bringing this to our attention.
The equilibrium equations are linearized via the Rybicky & Hummer technique is based on a modified operator splitting scheme by introducing an approximate operator (eq. 19) preconditioning scheme. The method also takes advantage of an operator splitting scheme with parabolic precision (Olson, Auer & Buchler 1986), currently considered the method of choice for complicated line transfer problems (e.g., Kunasz & Auer 1988; Auer, Fabiani Bendicho & Trujillo Bueno 1994; van Noort, Hubeny & Lanz 2002; Fabiani Bendicho 2003). With this SCP method, equation (eq. 3) was solved for many frequencies and ray inclinations, and the mean intensity computed from angular and frequency integrations (eq. 3) by numerical quadratures. To ensure the high precision required in this comparative study, the angular integration was done with a Gaussian quadrature with 24 points in the variable $\mu$. The frequency integrals were done with trapezoidal integration extending to $x = \pm 4$ with 33 frequency points, which we have verified yields the desired precision.

We proceed now to present solutions and comparisons of the newly developed CEP method with the SCP method for a number of standard problems. In all the examples we employ uniform physical conditions and the Doppler shape for the line profile, $\Phi = \pi^{-1/2} e^{-x^2}$; note that the line center optical depth is then $\tau_0 = \tau/\sqrt{\pi}$.

3 2-LEVEL ATOM

In the two-level problem, the steady-state rate equation $R_{21} = 0$ (eq. 9) yields the familiar expression for the source function

$$S = (1 - \epsilon) \bar{J} + \epsilon B(T)$$

where $B$ is the Planck function and where

$$\frac{\epsilon}{1 - \epsilon} = \frac{C_{21}}{A_{21}} \left(1 - e^{-E_{21}/kT}\right) \equiv \frac{N}{N_{cr}}$$

Here $N$ is the density of the collision partners and $N_{cr}$ the standard critical density with a slight modification that incorporates the Boltzmann factor correction. Replacing $\bar{J}$ with $p$ (eq. 21), the equation for the source function becomes

$$(1 + \eta p)S = B,$$

where $\eta = \frac{N_{cr}}{N}$.

This result also follows directly from eq. 10 with $R_{21} = 0$. When the 2-level problem is formulated with optical depth as the independent variable, it is fully characterized by the two input quantities $B(T)$ and $\epsilon$ (or, equivalently, $\eta$) specified as functions of $\tau$. There is no need to specify intrinsic properties of the transition such as, for example, $E_{21}$ or $A_{21}$. Instead of solving for the population of each of the two levels, this single equation for the unknown $S$ provides the complete solution of the problem.

Dividing the slab into zones, the rate equation $R_{21} = 0$ (eq. 10) produces a similar expression for the $i$-th zone,

$$S_i^t + \eta_i p_i S_i^t = B(T^t),$$

with $\eta_i$ and $T^t$ corresponding to the physical conditions in the zone. Inserting the expression for $p_i$ from equation 21 the CEP set of equations for the unknown $S_i^t$ is

$$(1 + \eta_i \beta_i) S_i^t + \frac{\eta_i}{\tau_{i+1}^{-1} - 1} \sum_{j=2}^{\infty} M_{ij} S_i^t = B(T^t)$$

Since the factors $\beta_i$ and $M_{ij}$ depend only on optical depth, they are independent of the unknown variables (the zone source functions $S_i^t$) in this case. Therefore, the CEP technique transforms the two-level problem to a set of linear equations. This is a reflection of the linear relation between $I_\nu$ and $S$ in eq. 10 that is maintained when the complete problem is handled in terms of optical depth as the independent variable. The CEP formulation produces directly the explicit linear equations in this case.

Figure 2. Plots of the functions $\beta$ (see eq. 16) and $\alpha = \tau \beta$ (eq. 16).
Zones & Time & % error \\
| SCP | CEP | SCP | CEP |
|---|---|---|---|
| 20 & 0.39 & — & 36.3 & 103.6 |
| 40 & 1.10 & — & 23.9 & 45.7 |
| 100 & 4.39 & .006 & 10.9 & 14.0 |
| 200 & 11.6 & .089 & 5.5 & 5.4 |
| 600 & 44.9 & 1.70 & 1.6 & 1.2 |

Table 1. Runtime (in seconds, on the same computer) required by the SCP and CEP methods to solve an atmosphere with $\epsilon = 10^{-3}$ for the number of zones listed in the first column; in the SCP method this corresponds to the number of grid points. Omitted entries were too short for meaningful timing. The listed error is the percent deviation from the result of an SCP calculation with 3,000 zones.

We proceed now with solutions for semi-infinite atmospheres and finite-thickness slabs with constant physical conditions. When the temperature is constant, $B(T)$ merely sets the intensity scale and only the dependence on $\epsilon$ need be studied.

### 3.1 Semi-infinite Atmosphere

We start with the classical problem of a stellar atmosphere, where $\tau$ measures distance from the surface and $\tau_i \to \infty$. The source function is subject in this case to the exact limits

$$ S \to B \times \begin{cases} \sqrt{\tau} & \text{when } \tau \to 0 \\ 1 & \text{when } \tau \gg 1/\epsilon \end{cases} $$

(28)

(e.g. Avrett & Hummer 1965). In order to capture both limit behaviors we model the atmosphere as a slab divided logarithmically into $z$ zones that cover ten orders of magnitude in optical depth from $\tau = 10^{-3}$ to $\tau_i = 10^7$, with the latter serving as a proxy for the atmospheric interior. The two faces of the slab are a-priori identical. When the radiative transfer equation is part of the calculation, this two-sided symmetry is broken by the boundary condition $I_\nu(\tau = \tau_i, \mu) = 0$, which introduces a radiation sink at the $\tau_i$-boundary. This is the case in all methods, including SCP.

The CEP method, on the other hand, does not involve the radiation at all and thus cannot invoke boundary conditions to differentiate between the slab two faces. Instead, this is accomplished by the logarithmic division that starts at one end, and the great disparity that this introduces between photon escape from the two sides. The semi-infinite atmosphere could also be mimicked by doubling the slab with its mirror image and considering the source function only between one surface and the mid-plane. We have verified that the results of calculations with the two approaches are practically identical. In order to compare the CEP method with SCP under identical conditions we present the results for logarithmic divisions increasing toward the slab surface at $\tau_i$.

Figure 3 shows the results for some representative models, ranging from $\epsilon = 10^{-5}$ ($N = 10^{-5}N'_{cr}$) to $\epsilon = 0.5$ ($N = N'_{cr}$). By example, the Ca II H line can be modeled in a 5000 K atmosphere with $\epsilon = 3.65 \times 10^{-5}$ (e.g., Avrett & Loeser 1987 and references therein). The top panel of each plot shows the solution obtained with the SCP method with 3,000 zones, displaying the proper limit behavior at both ends of the optical depth axis. The CEP method attains these solutions with a sufficient number of zones, validating our new technique. But the convergence with $z$ is quite different for the two methods.

At the surface, the SCP method is close to the exact solution already at $z = 20$ (only two zones per logarithmic decade) in all
cases; the deviation is less than 40% at $\epsilon = 10^{-5}$ and decreases further as $\epsilon$ increases. Increasing $z$ brings rapid convergence. In contrast, deep inside, the rate of convergence is much more moderate. Furthermore, when $\epsilon$ increases, both the magnitude of deviations and the rate of convergence around $\tau \sim 10$ remain almost the same for all $\epsilon \leq 0.1$. The behavior at both ends reflects the short characteristics nature of the method, in which only nearby regions are coupled, and the fact that the radiative transfer equation is always solved. Radiative transfer effects are minimal at small $\tau$, which is why the method attains easily the exact solution near the surface. But the effects are significant at the optical depths where the transition to thermalization occurs, the radiative transfer equation must be repeatedly solved and the convergence in these regions is hardly improved by the increase in collision rates as long as $N$ remains sub critical.

In an almost mirror behavior, at the surface the CEP method deviates from the exact solution by more than factor 2 at $z < 100$ when $\epsilon$ is small, and its convergence rate to the exact solution is slow there. However, deep inside the atmosphere, the deviations are actually smaller than at the surface. Moreover, when $\epsilon$ increases, the deviations decrease everywhere. At $\epsilon = 0.1$, the CEP method is within 7% of the exact solution everywhere already at $z = 20$; in contrast, this accuracy is attained by the SCP method only at $z = 100$. These properties are readily understood from the CEP formalism. Since the level population equations couple the entire atmosphere, the surface layers are affected by the behavior deep inside. And because the radiative transfer equation is avoided altogether, the method takes full advantage of the thermalization that approaches the surface when $\epsilon$ increases.

Performance statistics for the two methods are summarized in Table 1 for the case $\epsilon = 10^{-3}$; the statistics for other cases show similar trends. The CEP technique attains the solution much faster than the SCP method in all cases.

### 3.2 Finite-thickness Slabs

One of the main coolants of photodissociation regions (PDR) is the 158 $\mu$m line of C II, whose emission is often modeled with a simple escape probability approximation of the two-level system (e.g., Tielens and Hollenbach 1985). When this approach employs the Capriotti expression for the escape probability (eq. 16), it is identical to a CEP calculation with only one zone. For comparison with exact solutions, we include such single-zone CEP calculations in the results presented here. The numerical calculations employ $z$ zones of equal thickness.

Figure 4 shows the variation of the source function inside slabs of various optical thickness for $\epsilon = 10^{-5}$. The displayed behavior is representative of all $N \ll N'_{\epsilon}$ cases. The results of single-zone CEP calculations provide reasonable approximations at small $\tau$, but become poorer as the variation range of the source function gets wider with increasing $\tau$. However, with only 20 zones the CEP results are within 1% of the exact solution everywhere when $\tau \leq 10, 4\%$ when $\tau \leq 50$ and 10% when $\tau \leq 100$. An accuracy better than 10% is always achieved when the optical thickness of each zone is $\lesssim 5$. In contrast, the SCP method does not reach this level of accuracy near the surface of a $\tau = 500$ slab even with 200 zones; as a grid- rather than zone-based method, it attempts to resolve the surface structure even when that is not required. Furthermore, SCP calculations require a large number of divisions even at moderate optical thickness; when $\tau = 10$, a 10% accuracy requires 100 zones. The reason, as noted above, is that the equation of radiative transfer must be solved repeatedly; the approach to thermal equilibrium of level populations deep inside the slab does not alleviate this need, and large optical depths dictate a large number of zones.

Since the CEP technique employs only level populations it takes full advantage of level thermalization. The difference with standard methods in the case of $\epsilon = 0.5$ ($N = N'_{\epsilon}$), shown in figure 5 is striking. Already with one zone, CEP calculations produce acceptable results inside every slab, even with $\tau$ as large as 500; 20 zones suffice for 3% accuracy everywhere. In contrast, to achieve 10% accuracy, SCP requires 100 zones at a moderate $\tau = 50$, and even 200 zones are insufficient when $\tau = 500$. The zone

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*Figure 4.* The two-level model with $\epsilon = 10^{-5}$ in slabs with overall optical thickness $\tau$. The top panel of each plot shows the variation of the source function from the surface to the slab mid-plane in the exact solution and in a single-zone CEP calculation. The two other panels show the convergence to the exact solution with the number of zones $z$ for the CEP and SCP methods.
3.2.1 Slab emissivity

The advantages offered by the CEP method are even more pronounced for slab emission calculations. Figure 6 shows a striking result: When $\epsilon = 10^{-5}$ (i.e., $\eta = 10^5$), the CEP method produces with a single zone the correct line cooling coefficient for all slabs with $\tau_t \leq 500$. This result is easy to understand. From the behavior of the function $\beta$ at small and large $\tau$ (Capriotti 1965) it follows that $p(\tau) \sim 1$ when $\tau < 1$ and that $p(\tau) \sim 1/\tau$ when $\tau \gg 1$, so that $p(\tau) \gg 1/\tau$. Therefore, slabs with $\eta > \tau_t$ have $\eta p > 1$.
From equations 29 and 30 it follows that in this case
\[ \tau \ll \eta : \]
\[ S(\tau) = \frac{B}{\eta p}, \quad j(\tau) = \int_0^{\tau_1} \frac{1}{\eta} B d\tau \]  

The expression for \( j(\tau) \) involves only input properties. That is, the line cooling coefficient can be calculated in this regime without even solving the problem. This result does not seem to have been recognized in the published literature. When the physical conditions are constant, \( j = B\tau_1/\eta \); the source is optically thick yet its emission increases linearly with optical depth. The slab remains “effectively-thin” at large optical depths as long as \( \tau_1 \ll \eta \) (i.e., \( \epsilon \tau_1 \ll 1 \)). And because the CEP method employs discretized forms of these expressions, it reproduces the correct line emission irrespective of the division into zones.

Since \( j(\tau) \) can be calculated without solving any equations, the single-zone calculation produces the correct emission even though it does not reproduce the correct population distribution — as is evident from both eq. 30 and figure 4 and the source function varies in the slab while the one-zone result is constant. Still, this constant value is just the right average to reproduce correctly the slab luminosity. Another perspective on this result is provided by the spectral shape of the emergent radiation, shown in figure 7. The exact solution properly displays a self-absorption dip around line center (see, e.g., Avrett & Hummer 1965). The single-zone calculation is incapable of producing this feature, but its flat-top shape does enclose the same area, reproducing the correct line luminosity. The simple one-zone calculation properly reproduces the overall number of photons emitted in the line, though not the frequencies where they emerge.

When the problem is formulated in terms of \( \tau \), eq. 29 gives the line emission directly from the input properties. When the problem is formulated instead in terms of densities and distances, eq. 29 implies that\(^5\)

\[ n \ll \eta \]

This result was noticed in the limit in which \( n_2 \ll n_1 \) by D. Neufeld in benchmark testing of radiative transfer codes, posted at [http://www.mpifr-bonn.mpg.de/staff/fvandertak/H2O/radxfrtest.pdf](http://www.mpifr-bonn.mpg.de/staff/fvandertak/H2O/radxfrtest.pdf). Note that the line cooling always obeys

\[ \Lambda = E_{21} \int (C_{12} N_1 - C_{21} N_2) d\ell \]

\[ = E_{21} \int g_1 C_{12} (n_1 - n_2 e^{E_{21}/kT}) d\ell \]

as is evident from eqs. 5 8 and 10.

### Table 2

| Zones | SCP | CEP | SCP | CEP | SCP | CEP |
|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1     | 0.03| 99.5| 55.5| 98.6| 25.0|     |
| 10    | 0.60| 93.3| 31.0| 28.2| 13.2|     |
| 20    | 1.02| 88.2| 23.0| 17.5| 7.94|     |
| 40    | 3.29| 79.8| 15.5| 10.1| 4.01|     |
| 100   | 12.6| 65.2| 6.47| 3.94| 1.21|     |
| 200   | 28.1| 46.4| 2.22| 1.60| 0.40|     |

Table 2. Performance comparison of the SCP and CEP methods, similar to Table 1 for a slab with \( \epsilon = 10^{-3} \) and \( \tau_1 = 500 \). The listed errors include the percent deviations of both the source function and the line cooling coefficient from the exact results.

### Figure 7

Spectral shape of the flux emerging from slabs with \( \epsilon = 10^{-5} \) and optical depths as marked. The thick lines are the result of the exact solution, the thin lines of a single zone CEP calculation.

\[ \Lambda = E_{21} \int g_1 C_{12} (n_1 - n_2) d\ell. \]  

Although the condition \( \eta p > 1 \) ensures that \( n_2 \ll n_1 \) when \( E_{21} > kT \), \( n_2 \) need not be negligible when \( E_{21} < kT \). Therefore, the solution must be executed in this case to determine the population distribution and the actual value of \( \tau_1 \). Since the single-zone calculation does not produce the correct population distribution, its result for the overall optical depth can be wrong. To ensure the correct assignment of \( \tau_1 \) to the prescribed input, the problem must be solved properly, including the division into zones.

When \( \epsilon \) increases, the slab ceases to be “effectively thin” and the line luminosity begins to deviate from the one-zone CEP result, as is evident from figure 8. Eventually, line thermalization sets in with further increase in \( \epsilon \), and the single-zone result again becomes adequate. This behavior is further illustrated in figure 8. At a fixed \( \tau_1 \), the deviation from the single-zone CEP calculation reaches a maximum when \( \epsilon \sim 5/\tau_1 \). When \( \tau_1 = 50 \) the maximal deviation is \( \sim 20\% \) at \( \epsilon \sim 0.1 \), when \( \tau_1 = 500 \) it is \( \sim 70\% \) at \( \epsilon \sim 0.01 \). Varying \( \epsilon \) away from that peak in either direction, the one-zone CEP calculation gives a progressively better approximation.

With \( N_{ci}' = 4 \times 10^{15} \text{ cm}^{-3} \) at \( T = 75 \text{ K} \), the 158 \( \mu \text{m} \) line of CI is in the regime \( N \gtrsim N_{ci}' (\epsilon \gtrsim 0.5) \) in most cases of interest. Therefore single-zone CEP calculations for this line are expected to produce cooling rates accurate to better than \( \sim 10\% \) under most circumstances.

### 4 MULTI-LEVEL SYSTEMS

Consider \( L \) energy levels. A trivial change from the two-level case is the addition of some bookkeeping indices. We designate level numbers with subscripts and zone numbers with superscripts. In zone \( i \), the population per sub-state of level \( k \) is \( n_{ik} \) and the overall population is

\[ n^i = \sum_{k=1}^{L} g_k n_{ik} \]  

(31)

where \( g_k \) is the level degeneracy. Unlike the two-level system, locations in the slab cannot be specified by optical depth anymore because each transition has a different optical depth, which can be determined only after the unknown \( n_{ik} \) are calculated. Instead, the
partition into zones is done in terms of the geometrical distance from one surface. Denote by $\ell^i$ the width of the $i$-th zone, then its optical thickness in the transition between lower level $l$ and upper level $u$ is

$$
\tau_{ul}^{i,i-1} = \frac{1}{4\pi\Delta \nu_D} g_u B_{ul} E_{ul} (n_l^i - n_u^i) \ell^i,
$$

where $E_{ul}$ is the energy separation between levels $u$ and $l$. The equivalent of equation 11 is then

$$
\tau_{ul}^{i,j} = \sum_{k=j+1}^{i} \tau_{ul}^{k,k-1}
$$

when $i > j$. In complete analogy with equations 12, 17 and 18, the level population equations are

$$
\frac{dn_l^i}{dt} = - \sum_{l=1}^{k-1} A_{kl} p_{ul} n_u^i + C_{kl} \left( n_l^i - n_u^i e^{-E_{kl}/kT} \right)
+ \sum_{u=k+1}^{L} \frac{g_u}{g_k} \left[ A_{uk} p_{ul} n_u^i + C_{uk} \left( n_u^i - n_l^i e^{-E_{uk}/kT} \right) \right]
$$

Here

$$
p_{ul}^i = \frac{\beta_{ul}^i}{\tau_{ul}^{i,i}} + \sum_{j=1}^{i-1} \frac{n_l^j}{n_u^j} \frac{n_l^i - n_u^i}{n_l^j - n_u^j} M_{ul}^{i,j}
$$

where

$$
M_{ul}^{i,j} = -\frac{1}{2}(\alpha_{ul}^{i-j} - \alpha_{ul}^{i-j-1} - \alpha_{ul}^{i-j+1} + \alpha_{ul}^{i-1-j+1})
$$

and where $\beta_{ul}^i = \beta(\tau_{ul}^{i,i})$ and $\alpha_{ul}^{i-j} = \tau_{ul}^{i,i} \beta(\tau_{ul}^{i,i})$. This provides a set of $L - 1$ independent equations for the $L$ unknown populations in each zone, $n_l^i$. Equation 31 for the overall density in the zone closes the system. The overall system of non-linear algebraic equations for the level populations in all zones is readily solved with the Newton method.

It is convenient to switch to the scaled quantities $n_l^i/\tau_{ul}^{i,i}$ as the unknown variables and introduce the overall column density

$$
N = \sum_{i=1}^{z} n_l^i \ell^i
$$

Figure 8. Deviation of the one-zone CEP result from the exact value of the line cooling coefficient as a function of $\epsilon$ in two-level models with various slab thicknesses.

Figure 9. Variation of the emission in the $^3P$ cooling lines of O I with the number of zones in CEP calculations. Shown are the ratios to the exact solutions for slabs with $T = 100$ K, various H densities, as marked, and three representative oxygen column densities. At $N(O) \leq 10^{17}$ cm$^{-2}$, the single-zone calculation produces the exact result for both lines. The critical density for each line is listed in the top figure.

4.1 Example — the O I cooling lines

Together with the C II 158 $\mu$m, the $^3P$ lines of O I at 63 $\mu$m and 145 $\mu$m dominate the gas cooling of warm PDR. Ratios and peak intensities of these lines are used to measure the gas density and temper-
The ratio $r = \frac{\gamma(145\mu m)}{\gamma(63\mu m)}$ of the O I cooling lines as a function of oxygen column density for various temperatures and H densities, as marked. The top panel in each case shows the exact ratio $r$, the bottom panel the ratio of the results of single-zone calculations to the exact ones.

Figure 10 shows the variation of $r$ with column density and the deviations of the results of a one-zone calculation from the exact values. The single-zone results differ from the exact values by amounts that vary with temperature, density and oxygen column density. The deviations are generally largest at hydrogen densities around $10^{3} - 10^{4}$ cm$^{-3}$. As is evident from this figure, the variation range of $r$ is comparable to the error that can be introduced by its calculation with a single-zone. A reliance on such calculations can lead to erroneous conclusions regarding the physical conditions in a source. Indeed, from the observed ratio of

It is interesting to note that the 145 $\mu$m transition undergoes population inversion in the optically thin regime at low densities for temperatures above 300 K. The reason is that the radiative lifetime of its upper level is more than five times longer than for its lower level.
the two [OI] lines and escape probability calculations, Caux et al. (1999) deduced a mean gas temperature of 26±0.5 K, an H$_2$ density $\geq 3 \times 10^4$ cm$^{-3}$ and an [OI] column density $\geq 5 \times 10^{19}$ cm$^{-2}$.

However, as is evident from figure 1, the large values which they observed ($\tau \sim 0.4$) can be reached at lower columns for a wide range of somewhat higher temperatures.

One-zone CEP calculations of the OI cooling lines are not as reliable as they are for the CII 158 $\mu$m. However, it does not take too many zones for the CEP method to achieve adequate accuracy. As is evident from figure 9, 20 zones suffice for accomplishing better than 10% accuracy, and the exact solution is reached to within 1% with 40 zones in all cases.

5 DISCUSSION

The test cases presented here show that our new method not only provides an exact solution of the line transfer problem, it also outperforms the leading ALI solver by a margin even larger than that among different implementations of the ALI technique. Two fundamental properties give the CEP method intrinsic advantages. The first is the calculation of $\bar{J}$, the only radiative quantity required for solving the level populations. In the standard approach, $I_\nu(\mu)$ is determined from a solution of eq. 1 and $\bar{J}$ is calculated from eq. 3 in angular and frequency integrations that involve a-priori unknown dependencies on these two variables. Determining the dependence of $I_\nu(\mu)$ on $\nu$ and $\mu$ is a major task for the solution of the radiative transfer equation. Deviations of the computed $I_\nu(\mu)$ from its exact angular shape and frequency profile contribute to the error in the computed $\bar{J}$ in each iteration. In contrast, the CEP method determines $\bar{J}$ from the integration in eq. 2 that involves known dependencies on both $\nu$ and $\mu$; the dependence on these variables enters only from the optical depth $\tau_\nu(\mu)$, and it is a-priori known from the input to the problem. The angular and frequency integrations are exact in the CEP method; the fact that the dependence of $I_\nu(\mu)$ on $\nu$ and $\mu$ is unknown is altogether irrelevant.

The other intrinsic strength of the CEP method is that it involves only level populations and thus takes full advantage of thermalization wherever that sets in. In contrast, the ALI technique must repeatedly solve the radiative transfer equation in the entire source, even in thermalized regions, to determine the radiation field everywhere.

5.1 Technicalities

The great efficiency of the Newton method in solving non-linear equations is another advantage of the CEP method. The prerequisite for a successful solution is a reasonable initial guess. An efficient strategy for working implementations of CEP is to start from the actual populations of a previous solution for similar physical conditions. A particularly useful approach is to start from the optically thin limit in which $\rho = 1$ everywhere and solve the level populations from the corresponding linear equations. The column density $N'$ is now increased in small steps until the desired value is reached, using in each step the populations from the previous one as the initial distribution. This technique can also work in the opposite direction — start from thermal equilibrium populations and a very large $N'$, and decrease $N'$ in small steps. An added advantage of this approach is that each step also provides information about the number of zones required for CEP convergence.

The Newton method requires inversion of the Jacobian matrix, and the number of operations in this process increases as the third power of the matrix dimension. Although this rapid rise did not have a serious effect in the examples presented here, it could degrade the performance in cases of very large numbers of levels and zones. Matrix inversion is avoided in the iterative scheme designed by van der Vorst (1992) for solution of the linear system of the Newton method. In this scheme, geared toward sparse Jacobian matrices, only the non-zero matrix elements are stored and used. We have experimented with this method and found it to be quite useful for the CEP technique. It is particularly suitable for multi-level problems because they tend to produce sparse matrices, as each level generally couples to only a limited number of other levels. Other alternatives are to use quasi-Newton schemes (e.g., Broyden’s method) like those employed by Koesterke et al. (1992), or evolve the set of differential equations until reaching steady state.

The efficiency of CEP computations can be further enhanced with better grid design. Our solutions of the semi-infinite atmosphere employed grids with equal logarithmic spacing in $\tau$ over ten orders of magnitude, resulting in extremely thick zones deep inside the atmosphere. For example, even with $z = 600$, the zone thickness was $\tau = 1.7 \times 10^5$ in the $10^{6} \leq \tau \leq 10^{7}$ region. These extremely thick zones do not pose any difficulties to CEP computations because they occur in regions where the populations are thermalized. Indeed, the zones could be even thicker in a much larger fraction of the source without compromising accuracy. It should thus be possible to achieve the same accuracy with fewer zones by concentrating them in the regions where the populations deviate from thermal equilibrium. Since the number of zones is the single most important factor in determining CEP runtime, a more sophisticated grid construction will make the method even more efficient. We intend to investigate the implementation of adaptive gridding algorithms in future work.

An additional increase in efficiency can be easily gained in practical applications that do not require the extreme precision we imposed in this comparative study. Here the functions $\alpha$ and $\beta$ were calculated using the integral definition in eq. 22 repeatedly performing highly accurate quadrature. Instead, one could employ the approximate series expansion derived by Capriotti (1965) for the function $\beta$. We have verified that this rapidly convergent series is always within 3% of the exact result. Another option is to calculate once a finely spaced table of the $\alpha$ and $\beta$ functions and interpolate between its elements with an efficient algorithm.

5.2 CEP and ALI

The CEP method is suitable for solution also with the ALI approach. Starting from eq. 3 in the operator form $\bar{J} = \Lambda S$, the ALI technique is based on the operator splitting $\Lambda = \Lambda^* + (\Lambda - \Lambda^*)$, where $\Lambda^*$ is an approximation to the $\Lambda$ operator. The mean intensity is obtained from the approximate expression $\bar{J} = \Lambda^* S + (\Lambda - \Lambda^*) S^{\text{exact}}$ that involves the source function from the current and previous iterations. This approximation becomes exact upon convergence, when $S = S^{\text{exact}}$. As already noted, it has been shown that the optimal choice for $\Lambda^*$ is the diagonal of $\Lambda$.

Equation 4 gives $\bar{J} = (1 - p) S$, the $\Lambda$-operator form of the CEP method. From eq. 17 the matrix elements of the $\Lambda$-operator are simply

7 In Capriotti (1965), the small- and large-$\tau$ portions of the expansion were joined at line-center optical depth $\tau_0 = 5$. They should be joined instead at $\tau_0 = 3.41$ for a smooth transition.
\[ \Lambda_{ij} = (1 - \beta^2) \delta_{ij} - \frac{M^L_{ij}}{\tau_{ij}} (1 - \delta_{ij}) \]  

(38)

where \( \delta_{ij} \) is the Kronecker delta. Thanks to the known dependence on \( \nu \) and \( \mu \) in the CEP approach, this expression allows the usage of approximate operators \( \Lambda^* \) of increasing complexity without any additional computational effort in the calculation of the matrix elements. In standard ALI techniques \( \Lambda^* \) is the diagonal of \( \Lambda \), i.e., 

\[ \Lambda^*_ij = (1 - \beta^2) \delta_{ij}. \]

We have implemented this choice in an ALI solution of eq. 28 and performed the two-level model calculations presented in this paper also with this technique. In all cases, the solution converged to the exact same results as the algebraic CEP equations \( 27 \). Runtime for this ALI implementation of the CEP method was on par with the SCP method up to 200 zones, but fell behind at larger \( z \).\(^8\) Given that in the CEP ALI implementation we have adopted the standard choice for \( \Lambda^* \), the optimal choice in the CEP approach could well be different, improving the performance.

It is also important to point out that the CEP method could, in principle, be implemented in the framework of the Gauss-Seidel and Successive Overrelaxation iterative methods. These methods were first applied in radiative transfer problems by Trujillo Bueno & Fabiani Bendicho (1995) using SCP as the formal solver. They can lead to an order of magnitude improvement in the number of iterations used to reach convergence, with a time per iteration that is virtually the same as the method based on the Jacobi iteration. Also of interest is the possibility of implementing the CEP method in the linear (Steiner 1991) or the non-linear (Fabiani Bendicho, Trujillo Bueno & Auer 1997) multi-grid methods. All of these issues will be addressed in future investigations.

5.3 Extensions

All the examples presented in this paper involved constant physical conditions. Variable conditions are handled by simply starting with zones that have constant physical conditions and proceeding to refine those divisions as required by the CEP solution accuracy. Equation 34 for the level populations already incorporates the handling of variable conditions by allowing the temperature and collision rates to vary between the zones.

For simplicity, our method was introduced in the context of a quiescent slab with the Doppler line profile. None of these simplifications represents an inherent limitation of the CEP method. The formal expressions do not specify the shape of \( \Phi(x) \), and other line profiles can be implemented just the same. Extension from the slab to other geometries, although straightforward, requires some more work. Thanks to the planar symmetry, the angular variation of optical depth in a slab is simply \( \tau(\mu) = \tau(\mu = 1)/\mu \), independent of either position or density profile. This symmetry does not carry to any other geometry; even in the case of spherical symmetry, the angular variation of \( \tau \) cannot be calculated at any point other than the center without specifying the density profile. However, generalizing the basic CEP relation eq. 24 to handle any geometry is straightforward, and the fundamental advantage of integration over known frequency and angular variations remains intact. Finally, recalling that large velocity gradients was the context in which the escape probability approximation was originally introduced by Sobolev, the CEP method is well suited for exact handling of this case too.

The escape probability approach has been used in a number of simplified calculations of complex problems. These include: overlapping of spectral lines (so called “line fluorescence”), important for various ionic transitions (e.g., Bowen lines) in photoionized regions and OH lines in molecular clouds (Guilloteau, Lucas & Omont 1981, Elitzur & Netzer 1985, Lockett & Elitzur 1989); the effect of line overlap with underlying continuum (Netzer, Elitzur & Ferland 1985); and photoionization (Elitzur 1984). Importing these applications into the CEP framework is straightforward. Finally, another extension is the application of the CEP method to the self-consistent solution of the radiative transfer equations for polarized radiation and of the statistical equilibrium equations for the density matrix, the so-called non-LTE problem of the 2nd kind (see, e.g., Landi Degl’Innocenti 2003). We plan to provide these extensions in future publications.

5.4 Conclusions

While our new method outperforms the current leading techniques, its greatest advantage is its simplicity and ease of implementation. The CEP method employs a set of algebraic equations (eq. 34) that are already incorporated in numerous widely used codes based on the escape probability approximation. All that is required for an exact solution with these existing codes is to augment the escape probability with the zone-coupling sum on the right-hand-side of eq. 35. With this simple modification, the multi-level line transfer problem is solved exactly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Riccardo Cesaroni, Floris van der Tak and Stéphane Guilloteau for valuable remarks that helped us considerably in the preparation of this manuscript. This research was supported by NSF, NASA, the European Commission through the Solar Magnetism Network (contract HPRN-CT-2002-00313) and by the Spanish Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia through project AYA2004-05792.

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APPENDIX A: EXTERNAL RADIATION

The only effect of external radiation on the rate equations is to modify the exchange rate $R_{ul}^i$ between levels $u$ and $l$ in the $i$-th zone (see eq. 12) according to

$$R_{ul}^i \Rightarrow R_{ul}^i - B_{ul} \bar{J}_e (n_u^i - n_l^i),$$

(A1)

where $\bar{J}_e$ is the zone average (as in eq. 13) of the contribution of the external radiation to the local $\bar{J}$. When the external radiation corresponds to the emission from dust which permeates the source, $\bar{J}_e$ is simply the angle-averaged intensity of the local dust emission in the $i$-th zone. When the external radiation originates from outside the slab and has an isotropic distribution with intensity $I_e (= \bar{J}_e)$ in contact with the $\tau = 0$ face, then

$$\bar{J}_e = \frac{1}{2} J_e \frac{1}{\tau_{ul}^{i-1}} \left( \alpha_{ul}^{i,0} - \alpha_{ul}^{i-1,0} \right).$$

(A2)

When the slab is illuminated by parallel rays with intensity $I_e (= 4\pi J_e)$ entering at direction $(\mu_0, \phi_0)$ to the $\tau = 0$ face then

$$\bar{J}_e = J_e \frac{\mu_0}{\tau_{ul}^{i-1}} \left[ \gamma(\tau_{ul}^i/\mu_0) - \gamma(\tau_{ul}^{i-1}/\mu_0) \right]$$

(A3)

where

$$\gamma(\tau) = \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \left[ 1 - e^{-r\Phi(x)} \right] dx.$$ 

(A4)