THE RATE OF CHEMISORPTION OF NITROGEN
ON IRON: COMMENTS ON A STATEMENT
BY T. KWAN

By

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In a recent communication1) KWAN commented on the validity of
the ELOVICH equation as an expression for nitrogen chemisorption
kinetics, claiming the power rate law to be adequate for that purpose.
We claim the ELOVICH equation to be precise for that purpose.

KWAN based his comments on apparent curvature of log \((-\frac{1}{p} \frac{dp}{dt})\)
versus \(q\) plots. Such treatments based on approximated rates are not
precise and may lead to inclusive or wrong results2\textsuperscript{3}).

The ELOVICH equation

\[
\frac{dq}{dt} = ae^{-aq}
\]  (1)

is most easily and correctly applied to experimental data in one of
its integrated forms, \textit{viz}.

\[
q = \frac{1}{a} \ln (1 + aat),
\]
\[
q = \frac{1}{a} \ln (t + t_o) - \frac{1}{a} \ln t_o
\]  (2)

Application requires a simple plot of \(q\) \textit{versus} \(\ln (t+t_o)\). Evaluation
of the parameters \(t_o\), \((a)\) and \(a\) may be made by means of objective
numerical methods\textsuperscript{3}).

Mathematically, from equation (1), a plot of the logarithms of the
momentary rates at various times as a function of \(q\) should also be

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3) H. A. TAYLOR, P. C. Reilly Lectures, Vol. XII, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1956,
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linear and furnish similar information. There are two practical difficulties connected with this latter procedure. The first, as Taylor and Thon pointed out, depends on the presence of an initial massive adsorption which occurs much more rapidly than the succeeding slow adsorption. The apparent rates observed initially are therefore markedly higher than those calculated from \( t \) and must be reduced by this initial adsorption which, from the plot of equation (2), may be determined as the value of \( q \) at time \( t_0 \). Obviously, if the apparent rates are plotted logarithmically against values of \( q \), no straight line can result, since the earliest values are inconsistent with the later ones. In the second place, for equation (1) it is the instantaneous rates, \( dq/dt \), which must be used. These may be determined from the experimental data of values of \( q \) at various times \( t \), either as average rates, \( dq/dt \), over short time intervals, or from the slopes of tangents to a direct plot of the data. Either method is fraught with difficulty, especially in the early stages of adsorption where the rate is changing rapidly and may lead to erroneous conclusions.

An excellent example of this is provided by the chemisorption kinetics of nitrogen on iron, shown to be Elovichian by Taylor\(^5\) and, more recently in a comparative study, by Scholten and Zwijterink\(^7\), which is disputed by Kwan\(^7\). An occurrence similar to that found with the data of Kwan was found with data of rates at various times given by Brunauer, Love and Keenan\(^6\) which did not plot linearly as \( \log (\text{rate}) \) versus \( q \). It appeared, however, on close scrutiny that these were not new data but earlier data of Emmett and Brunauer\(^8\) “recalculated” to give rates. Taylor and Thon had already shown that the original data plotted linearly as \( q \) versus \( \log t \).

Let us therefore consider the data of Kwan. For example, the 400\(°\) run\(^5\).

The plot\(^5\) of \( \log (-1/P \, dP/dt) \) versus \((P_o-P)\) is again reproduced as plot A in Figure 1. It is apparent that there is considerable scatter of points and that the plot could be curvilinear or could consist of two interesting straight lines. Curve B of Figure 1 is a plot of \((P_o-P)\) versus \( \log t \), constructed from the same data\(^6\). It is obvious that the

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8) T. Kwan, this Journal, 3, 109 (1955); Table 2, p. 114 gives pressures, declining from \( P_o=1.728 \text{ mmHg} \) at \( t=0 \), as a function of time.
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Fig. 1.
approximation to linearity in each portion is excellent. Such breaks in $q - \ln t$ plots have been found previously and have been interpreted as being due to different sites$^{1,2}$. Behaviour analogous to the above is found with the rest of the nitrogen adsorption data. Unwarranted difficulties are then introduced through the use of rates calculated from successive $q$ and $t$ values. The approximation of these momentary rates is not adequate. It is obvious that a simple and direct treatment of experimental data is preferable to an indirect one involving approximations if both treatments are mathematically equivalent. It is further obvious that should momentary rates be derived, these may be precisely calculated from the rate parameters.