Spectroscopic Units in Conjugated Polymers: A Quantum Chemically Founded Concept?

Wichard J. D. Beenken* and Tõnu Pullerits

Department of Chemical Physics, Lund University, 22100 Lund, Sweden

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In conjugated polymers the concept of spectroscopic units belonging to different spatial segments of the chain, which are responsible for the spectroscopic properties of the polymer, has been used to explain the spectral heterogeneity and the excitation migration by ( Förster type) hopping transfer. In the present work we study the possible mechanism of segmentation of polythiophene into spectroscopic units by using quantum-chemical methods (ZINDO). We found that static geometric defects such as kinks or torsions do not result in a significant localization of the excited states to a certain segment. Hence, we propose that a dynamic localization of excitation due to the interaction between the nuclear and electronic degrees of freedom is responsible for the formation of the spectroscopic units.

1. Introduction

The electronic structure of photoexcited states of conjugated polymers is one of the fundamental issues in studies at these promising materials. The conjugated polymers might be seen as one-dimensional semiconductors and correspondingly be described in terms of electronic band structures. However, in a bulk polymer structural and chemical defects, like hydrogenated double bonds, kinks, and torsions, are expected to break the translation symmetry and limit the delocalization of the electronic wave functions. A similar effect is well-known for molecular aggregates. Hence, the conjugated polymer is usually described as a chain partitioned into so-called spectroscopic units the excited states are delocalized over. In this model the spectroscopic properties and the excitation energy transfer of the polymer are described as those of an ensemble of spectroscopic units.

For oligothiophenes it has been experimentally shown that absorption energy and oscillator strength for the first singlet excited state \( (S_1) \) depend on the number of conjugated thiophenyl rings \( N \). Our own results obtained by the semiempirical quantum-chemical method ZINDO for several straight transoid oligothiophenes are shown in Figure 1. These results fit remarkably well to the energy dependence predicted by exciton theory as

\[
E_1(N) = 4.8 \text{ eV} - 2.7 \text{ eV} \times \cos \left( \frac{\pi}{N + 1} \right)
\]  

Figure 1. Transition energies \( E_1 \) (filled squares) and oscillator strengths \( f_1 \) (open circles) of the \( S_1 \) excitation for oligothiophenes in dependence of the number \( N \) of thiophenyl rings.

One may be tempted to conclude that the \( S_1 \) energy of the polythiophene is represented by the asymptotic value 2.1 eV for \( N \to \infty \). The measured absorption spectra of polythiophenes, however, show a significant inhomogeneous broadening toward higher energies. This suggests a segmentation of the polymer chain into spectroscopic units, which are assumed to have the same properties as oligothiophenes of the corresponding length. According to the random distribution of their lengths, the transition energies of the spectroscopic units vary. Thus the inhomogeneous broadening of the absorption spectrum of polythiophenes would be explained. Analogously, excitation energy transfer from the shorter spectroscopic units, with consequently higher \( S_1 \) energy, to the longer ones, with lower \( S_1 \) energy, can explain the strongly red-shifted, and in comparison to the absorption narrower, luminescence spectra.

Furthermore, models based on spectroscopic units have been successfully applied to simulate the measured transient anisotropy decay in polythiophenes.

In the current article we analyze the possible origins of the segmentation into spectral units for polythiophene, which is used for organic light emitting devices. We apply the ZINDO method to study the excited states of several dodecithiophenes, each deformed by a single specific defect, i.e., either a hydrogenated double bond, a kink, or a torsion. The results are discussed in the context of a possible segmentation of polythiophenes into spectroscopic units—in particular to what extent these resemble the optical properties of transoid oligothiophenes of various length.

* Corresponding author. Present address: Universität Wien, Institut für Theoretische Chemie, Währinger Str. 17, A1090 Wien, Austria. E-mail: Wichard.Beenken@univie.ac.at.
The single-CI Hamiltonian for singlet excitation yield as included in ab initio single-CI calculations. The eigenstates of overlaps are parametrized. This parametrization implicitly takes interaction (single-CI) Hamiltonian. All integrals except for the and a subsequent diagonalization of the single-configuration singles and oscillator strengths of the two lowest excited states do not significantly affect the structure of the neighbor-...
which has been partially relaxed by an incomplete geometry optimization using molecular mechanics (UFF method as implemented in Gaussian 98\textsuperscript{28}). The optimization avoids unrealistic structures, where stressing forces would not only break the π-conjugation, but also the σ-bonds. Usually the oligothiophene molecule would try to escape the stress on the σ-bonds by torsion of the bonds between the thiophenyl rings. Because torsions shall be studied separately, for the horizontal kink we allowed this degree of freedom (constricted to transoid character) for the four thiophenyl rings forming the kink. The others remain in the same plane. In the case of azimuthal kinks (see below) we froze the torsional degree of freedom in the geometry optimization for the whole molecule. In Figure 4 we present the transition density for the two lowest singlet excitations (S\textsubscript{1} and S\textsubscript{2}) for the horizontally kinked transoid dodecithiophene. Even though the transition densities for the S\textsubscript{1} excitation are more concentrated on the longer branch of the kinked molecule, there is no clear segmentation. The transition density on the other branch is still significant. This has an important effect on the orientation of the transition dipole: It is out of line with the longer branch. For the S\textsubscript{2} excitation at first view one would assume a similar picture where only the transition density is now concentrated on the shorter branch. However, a closer investigation reveals that the symmetry of the transition density for the S\textsubscript{2} excitation is completely different from that obtained for the S\textsubscript{1} excitation. They result in transition dipoles (μ\textsubscript{1} and μ\textsubscript{2}) nearly perpendicular to each other. For spectroscopic units the transition dipoles should have been parallel to the respective branches left and right of the kink. Also the strengths of the transition dipoles do not correspond to the length of the two branches. For the S\textsubscript{2} excitation we obtained only 20\% of the oscillator strength of the S\textsubscript{1} excitation. Due to the fact that the oscillator strength of an oligothiophene depends linearly on its length, we would have expected to get a ratio of 5:7 (or 4:6 for excluding the two thiophenyl rings forming the kink). However, the transition energies of 2.37 eV for the S\textsubscript{1} excitation and of 2.61 eV for the S\textsubscript{1} excitation fit quite well to oligomers of 4–6 thiophenyl rings. However, the S\textsubscript{1} energy of 1.9 eV is even lower than that of the S\textsubscript{2} excitation of the straight dodecithiophene (2.14 eV). We attribute this to an increased ground-state energy due to the stress on the binding π-bond at the azimuthal kink. In the S\textsubscript{1} state the π-bonds at the kink have a more antibinding character and thus they are less stressed. Consequently, the transition energy from S\textsubscript{0} to S\textsubscript{1} is lowered. The S\textsubscript{2} state has a node at the kink. Thus the π-bonds remain of a similar binding character as in the ground state and the transition energy from S\textsubscript{0} to S\textsubscript{2} is not lowered.

Concluding, we can state that neither horizontal nor azimuthal kinks give rise to a spatial segmentation of the transition density of a polythiophene chain.

**3.3. Torsions and Cisoid Defects.** Our model for the torsional defect in a polythiophene chain is a straight dodecithiophene with six transoid thiophenyl rings at the one end and four transoid thiophenyl rings at the other end. These subchains are planar in themselves but perpendicular to each other. They are bridged by two thiophenyl rings each of them turned by 150° in respect to the neighbors. A subsequent geometry optimization has not been applied, because such torsions between two thiophenyl rings are not significantly hindered for dihedral angles between 130° and 210°. Actually the 2,2′-bithiophene has a structure where the dihedral angle between the two thiophenyl rings is about 150°, though the barrier at 180°, i.e., for the planar geometry, is very low\textsuperscript{30–32}. It has been suggested that torsions of 90° around the axis of the chain breaks the π-conjugation completely. Contrary to this, we found that for the given geometry the transition densities have not even a node at the torsional defect (Figure 6). With respect to the distribution along the molecular axis, the transition densities are very similar to those obtained for the planar molecule. Consequently, the oscillator strength for the S\textsubscript{1} excitation (f\textsubscript{1} = 4) is approximately the same as for the planar transoid dodecithiophene, and the optical transition to the S\textsubscript{2} state, which in the planar case is forbidden by symmetry, has
only small oscillator strength \( f_2 = 0.26 \). That there exists an axial transition dipole \( \mu_2 \) results from the shift of the transition density node, which in the planar case is in the center, toward the torsional defect. The transition energies are 2.38 eV for the \( S_1 \) state and 2.60 eV for the \( S_2 \) state. These correspond to oligothiophenes consisting of six and four thiophenyl rings.

A special kind of defect is related to the cis–transoid stereomerism for the bonds between two thiophenyl rings. In the present work we study a dodecithiophene where two cisoid bonds form a bow between two straight chains with six and three transoid bonds. The cisoid bond can formally be seen as a torsion about 180°, but the resulting geometry is also similar to a horizontal kink. However, the cisoid bonds are less stressed than the bent transoid bonds, which form the horizontal kink described above. In principle, there is no big difference between a cisoid and a transoid \( \pi \)-conjugation. Both transition densities, for the kinked cis–transoid as well as for the straight all-transoid dodecithiophene, do not show any segmentation (cf. Figures 2 and 4). In both cases the characteristic node for the \( S_2 \) state is located between the sixth and seventh thiophenyl ring. The nonzero transition dipole moment \( \mu_2 \) of the cis–transoid stereomer (corresponding to oscillator strength \( f_1 = 0.57 \)) results from the bent geometry. For the same reason the oscillator strength of the \( S_1 \) excitation \( f_1 = 3.26 \) is somewhat smaller than for the straight all-transoid dodecithiophene. Like for the horizontal kink, the two transition dipoles \( \mu_1 \) and \( \mu_2 \) are almost perpendicular to each other. The energies of 2.15 eV for the \( S_1 \) state and 2.42 eV for the \( S_2 \) state are nearly the same as those found for the straight all-transoid dodecithiophene (2.14 and 2.41 eV, respectively). Concluding, we can state, that the change from transoid to cisoid orientation of the thiophenyl rings hardly affects the transition densities with respect to their distribution on the atoms following the trajectory of the polymer chain. In particular, there occurs no segmentation (Figure 7).

4. Discussion

The concept of spectroscopic units has been used for describing various stationary and ultrafast spectroscopy experiments (see above). Usually, one relates the length of a spectroscopic unit to the length of conjugation, which is assumed to be broken by various chemical and structural defects. In the current work we have used the transition density as a measure for the spatial extent of the excited electronic state, which should be related to the spectroscopic unit. According to our results, however, geometric defects, i.e., kinks or torsions, do not segment the transition density of the excited states.

From the experimental point of view, there is little reason to mistrust the concept of spectroscopic units, but we need to find a reliable microscopic model for their origin. In this context it is useful to relate the problem to the well-established theory of excitons in linear molecular aggregates.\(^{13,33,34}\) In the exciton model the eigenstates of the electronic Hamiltonian are delocalized, i.e., the exciton states span over the whole aggregate, as long as the disorder of the site energies is low.\(^{10,35}\) However, when nuclear dynamics are included into the model, this delocalization may be destroyed by formation of an exciton–polaron. It is the ratio between the excitonic interaction and electron–phonon coupling, which determines whether the state will stay delocalized or it will localize.\(^{36–38}\) The same process will also take place in conjugated polymers forming so-called neutral polarons.\(^{39–42}\)

In our quantum-chemical calculations the nuclear motion has not been taken into account. Hence, the calculated states \( S_i \) do not represent the relaxed excited states. Nevertheless, we can qualitatively describe how the localization process acts. We calculate the difference of electron density between the excited state \( S_i \) and the ground state \( S_0 \) from ZINDO as

\[
\Delta \rho_i(r) = \sum_{\rho,\nu,i,k} \left( \xi_{\rho,\nu,i,k}^{\ast} \xi_{\nu,i,k} - \xi_{\nu,i,k}^{\ast} \xi_{\rho,\nu,i,k} \right) \phi_{\rho}(r) \phi_{\nu}(r) \tag{5}
\]

Due to this change of the charge distribution in the molecule after excitation, the nuclei will be driven out of the ground-state potential minimum by forces

\[
F_n(R_n) = \frac{\varepsilon^2}{4\pi\varepsilon_0} \int \frac{\Delta \rho_i(r)}{|r-R_n|^3} \, \, d^3r \tag{6}
\]

For example in Figure 8 both, the difference of electron density and resulting nuclear forces, are shown for the \( S_2 \) state of the horizontally kinked dodecithiophene (cf. Figure 4). One can see...
that the resulting forces of the nuclei belonging to the right side of the kink are much stronger than those on the left side. Notably, they result mainly in a displacement of the potential minimum for the C–C stretching mode of the analogue oligothiophene (\( \tilde{\nu}_{\text{C–C}} \approx 1300 \text{ cm}^{-1} \)). This situation is very similar to what has been found for excitonically coupled heterodimers.\(^{36}\) Hence, we expect that the feedback from the changed positions of the nuclei to the electronic system will result in a localization for the relaxed \( S_2 \) state (as represented by its transition and different electron density) on the shorter branch of the kinked dodec thiophene. Analogously, the relaxed \( S_1 \) state will be localized on the longer branch. Important for this dynamic localization is that it is seeded by an initial preference of the excited state to one of the straight branches, i.e., the transition as well as electron density are more concentrated to the right or left side of the kink, respectively. Consequently, horizontal kinks and torsional defects (cf. Figures 4 and 6) can partition the excitation into spatially separated spectral units by dynamic localization, whereas azimuthal kinks will most likely not separate spectroscopic units but may act as spectral units by dynamic localization, whereas azimuthal kinks concentrated to the right or left side of the kink, respectively.

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References and Notes


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