

An experiment to investigate Venus's deep atmosphere



Sébastien Lebonnois (LMD/IPSL, CNRS, France), Gerald Schubert (UCLA, USA), Josette Bellan (JPL, USA), Tibor Kremic, Leah Nakley, Kyle Phillips (NASA GRC, USA), Thomas Navarro (UCLA, USA)

Context The characteristics of the Venus atmosphere closest to the ground are still unknown to a large degree. The only reliable temperature profile measured below 12 km altitude was obtained in 1985 by the VeGa-2 lander [1,2]. This profile, obtained during the ~1h descent, is highly unstable in the lowest 7 km. This would imply that the near-constant vertical gradient is steeper than the adiabat – a characteristic that may be explained by a variation of the abundance of nitrogen from 3.5% at 7 km altitude to 0 at the surface [3] (see Fig.1).

Motivation The physics of the composition gradient is difficult to understand in the absence of more information. However, considering the observations in a recent experiment (Hendry et al., 2013 [4], see Fig. 2), we conjectured that this gradient could result from gravity effects inducing a density-driven separation of nitrogen and carbon dioxide.

Figure 2 : The Hendry et al. (2013) experiment [4]. The experiment vessel was 18 cm tall, and was filled with CO₂ and N₂ at pressures ranging from 100 to 310 bar, at room temperature (296K). CO₂ was introduced first, then N₂, to reach a molar mix of 50%/50%. The gas was let to rest for « several hours » then the composition was measured with a Gas Chromatograph at four different locations in the vessel (top, bottom, and two intermediate points). At 296K, 100 bar, the composition was reported to be stable, with 70% N₂ at the top and 90% CO₂ at the bottom. The authors claim that this gradient is stable and due to a density-driven separation of the two gases.

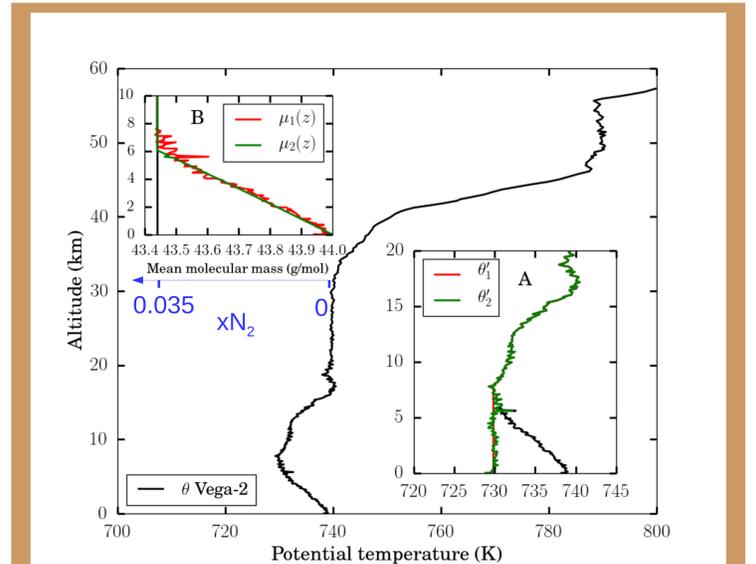
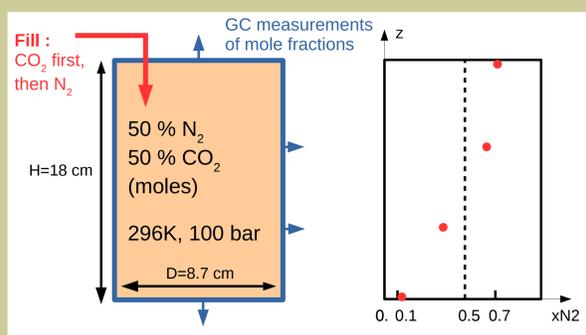


Figure 1 : The potential temperature profile measured by the VeGa-2 probe is highly unstable in the lowest 7 kilometers (black). A neutral profile can be obtained (A, red/green) if the mean molecular mass varies with height (B, red/green). This corresponds to a vertical gradient in the mole fraction of N₂ [3].

GEER experiment To investigate the behavior of the CO₂-N₂ mixture under conditions ranging from the Hendry et al. (2013) experiment [4] to the near-surface atmosphere of Venus, we designed an experiment that was conducted at the Glenn Extreme Environment Rig (GEER) [5], at NASA Glenn Research Center in Cleveland in August 2018 (Figs. 3 and 4). This experiment was funded by the NASA Solar System Workings Program.

Results

(1) For the well-mixed batch of gas, the composition was measured at all three ports **during roughly 15 hours** in each configuration. The results are always the same: **the composition is identical at all three ports, and stable. No density-driven separation is observed.**

(2) To understand the Hendry et al. experiment, the same protocol was used: introducing CO₂ first, then N₂. To reproduce the same mix of gas, the same masses were used for each gas. In these cases, the first samples indicated nearly 100% CO₂ at the bottom port and nearly 100% N₂ at the top port. **The composition evolved very slowly over time at each port, with time scales of the order of 10 days.** The composition was measured over at least 24 hours, over 3 days for the first and last tests, with continuous (but slow) composition variations.

This may explain the results of the Hendry et al. experiment. It was not a stable situation, but rather a slowly evolving mix. A full analysis of the experiment results will be done in the coming months.

Pressure evolution (non-ideal behavior)

At 296K and 310K, inserting the gases one after the other results in a peculiar behavior. When filled with exactly the same mass of each component as for the well-mixed batch, the pressure after filling is not 100 bar, but significantly less (80 bar for the 50%/50% mix), and the pressure rises slowly with time. This behavior is explained by the fact that CO₂ (even with a small amount of N₂) is close to the critical point, and, therefore, the density in the bottom of the vessel is significantly greater than for an ideal gas. The non-homogeneous system has to balance nearly-pure N₂ at the top and nearly-pure CO₂ at the bottom. The resulting pressure is much less than for the well-mixed gas. As mixing occurs, the amount of N₂ in the CO₂ at the bottom of the tank increases and the density of the mix changes, resulting in a continuous increase in pressure.

This behavior is not observed at the higher temperatures of the current experiment.

Diffusion timescales

In the vessel, diffusion may occur through small-scale turbulence during the initial fill, but may be dominated by molecular diffusion after resting for a while.

The molecular diffusion coefficient for the binary mix CO₂/N₂ is :
 $D = 0.16 \text{ cm}^2/\text{s} @ 1 \text{ bar}, 293\text{K} \Rightarrow D \sim 1.6 \cdot 10^{-3} \text{ cm}^2/\text{s} @ 100 \text{ bar}, 296\text{K}$
 Time scale for molecular diffusion in the test vessel (L~60 cm) :
 $\tau \sim L^2/D \sim 2 \cdot 10^6 \text{ s} \sim 26 \text{ days} \quad (\tau \sim 7 \text{ days} @ 100 \text{ bar}, 735\text{K})$



Figure 3 : The GEER chamber [5]. (top) Front end, with the three sampling lines. (bottom) Inside, with the thermal heaters and the test vessel for our experiment.

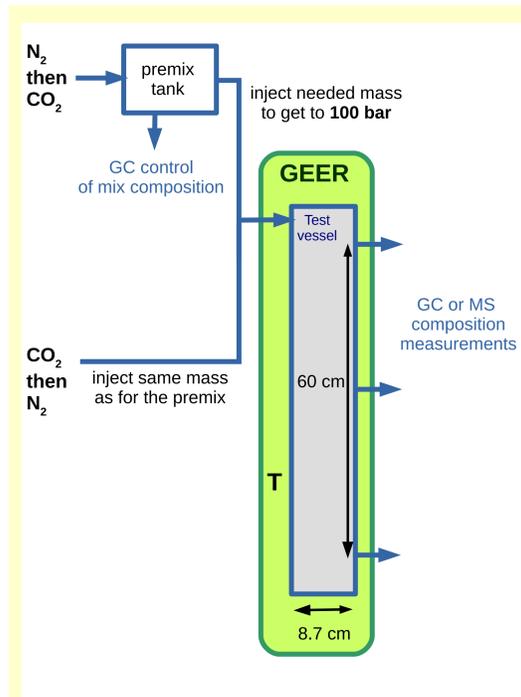


Figure 4 : Experiment set-up.

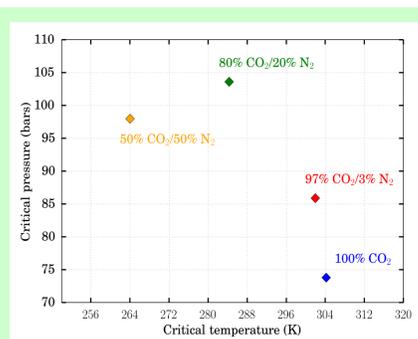


Figure 5 : Critical points for the various mix used.

To vary the experimental conditions from the Hendry et al. (2013) experiment to Venusian conditions, the following tests were done :

P (bar)	100	100	100	100	100	100
T (K)	296	310	310	310	500	735
% CO ₂	50	50	80	97	97	97
% N ₂	50	50	20	3	3	3

Each experiment was done first with a well-mixed batch of gas, then, using the same masses of each gas, for a mix done by inserting first CO₂, then N₂, as was done in the Hendry et al. (2013) experiment.

Conclusions - Perspectives

This experiment clearly showed that there is no peculiar density-driven separation in the CO₂ / N₂ mixture occurring at 100 bar. When these two gases are well-mixed, they stay well-mixed over the time scales used in this experiment. However, it also showed that when CO₂ and N₂ are stratified, it may be difficult to mix them.

How to explain the gradient in composition suggested by the VeGa-2 temperature profile in the 7-kilometer layer above the surface of Venus, then ? Could there be unexpected sources or sinks of CO₂ and/or N₂ near the surface of Venus ? This question needs to be thoroughly investigated.

We also emphasize that additional in-situ data from the near-surface layer of the Venusian atmosphere is crucial ! We will not be able to understand the processes occurring near and at the surface of Venus without a new mission to investigate this harsh but surprising environment.

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References [1] Linkin et al., *Sov. Astron. Lett.* 12, 40-42, 1986 ; [2] Lorenz et al., *Icarus* 305, 277-283, 2018 ; [3] Lebonnois & Schubert, *Nature Geosci.* 10, 473-477, 2017 ; [4] Hendry et al., *J. of CO₂ Utilization* 3-4, 37-43, 2013 ; [5] Kremic et al., *IEEE Aerospace*, 2014 (<https://ntrs.nasa.gov/archive/nasa/casi.ntrs.nasa.gov/20140013390.pdf>)