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Definition of the mole

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IUPAC Provisional Recommendation

Roberto Marquardt, Juris Meija, Zoltán Mester, Marcy Towns, Ron Weir, Richard Davis, and Jürgen Stohner*

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Abstract: In 2011 the General Conference on Weights and Measures (CGPM) noted the intention of the International Committee of Weights and Measures (CIPM) to revise the entire International System of Units (SI) by linking all seven base units to seven fundamental physical constants. Of particular interest to chemists, new definitions for the kilogram and the mole have been proposed. A recent IUPAC Technical Report discussed these new definitions in relation to immediate consequences for the chemical community. This IUPAC Recommendation on the preferred definition of the mole follows from this Technical Report. It supports a definition of the mole based on a specified number of elementary entities in contrast to the present 1971 definition.

1 Introduction

The 9th General Conference on Weights and Measures (CGPM) instructed the International Committee for Weights and Measures (CIPM) in 1948 "to make recommendations for a single practical system of units of measurement, suitable for adoption by all countries adhering to the Metre Convention" [1]. In 1954 the 10th CGPM adopted a practical system of units of measurements for international use. It contained six base units: the metre, kilogram, second, ampere, degree Kelvin (later renamed kelvin), and candela [2]. This international system was named "Système International d'Unités" (engl. International System of units) and abbreviated as SI by the 11th CGPM [3]. The seventh base unit, the mole, was added to the SI in 1971 by the 14th CGPM [4].

The International Bureau of Weights and Measures (BIPM) publishes the SI Brochure with the purpose "to define and promote the SI, which has been used around the world as the preferred language of science

Roberto Marquardt: Laboratoire de Chimie Quantique, Institut de Chimie, Université Louis Pasteur, 1 Rue Blaise Pascal, F-67008 Strasbourg France

Juris Meija: National Research Council Canada, Measurement Science and Standards, 1200 Montreal Road M-12, Ottawa, ON K1A 0R6 Canada

Zoltán Mester: National Research Council Canada, Measurement Science and Standards, 1200 Montreal Road M-12, Ottawa, ON K1A 0R6 Canada

Marcy Towns: Purdue University, Department of Chemistry, 560 Oval Drive, West Lafayette, Indiana USA

Ron Weir: Royal Military College of Canada, Department of Chemistry & Chemical Engineering, P.O. Box 17000, Stn. Forces, Kingston, ON K7K 7B4 Canada

Richard Davis: Bureau International des Poids et Mesures, Pavillon de Breteuil F-92312 Sèvres Cedex France

*Corresponding Author: Jürgen Stohner: ZHAW Zürich University of Applied Sciences, ICBT Institute for Chemistry & Biotechnology, Einsiedlerstrasse 31, CH 8820 Wädenswil Switzerland , email: sthj@zhaw.ch and *Guest scientist at:* ETHZ Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Laboratory for Physical Chemistry, ETH Hönggerberg, Wolfgang-Pauli-Strasse 10, CH-8092 Zürich, Switzerland, email: just@phys.chem.ethz.ch

and technology since its adoption in 1948" [5]. The SI is an evolving system which reflects current best measurement practices. Thus, changing the definition of base units of measurement is not an unprecedented nor unusual action. The evolving definition of the metre is an example of this. Early adoption of the metre as the unit of length by the French government resulted in its definition as the $1:10\,000\,000$ part of the meridian through Paris between the North Pole and the equator. A century later, the first meeting of the CGPM in 1889 sanctioned a new platinum-iridium prototype metre bar which served as the official international metre until 1960. The desire to adopt an indestructible standard and advances in interferometry led the 11th CGPM to further redefine the metre as "the length equal to $1650\,763.73$ wavelengths in vacuum of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the levels $2p_{10}$ and $5d_5$ of the krypton 86 atom" in 1960 [6]. With fixing the velocity of light to a constant value, the metre was last redefined by the 17th CGPM in 1983 as "the length of the path travelled by light in vacuum during a time interval of $1/299\,792\,458$ of a second" [7].

The present SI has several important shortcomings (see [8] and references therein). Notably, the base unit kilogram is based on an artifact, a platinum-iridium cylinder (the international prototype kilogram, IPK) manufactured in 1879 and stored at the BIPM. There is an intrinsic uncertainty in the long-term stability of the IPK. In principle, this instability also impacts other SI units that depend on the kilogram, among which is the mole.

In 1999 the 21st CGPM recommended that "national laboratories continue their efforts to refine experiments that link the unit of mass to fundamental or atomic constants with a view to a future redefinition of the kilogram" [9]. Furthermore, in 2011 the CGPM noted the intention of the International Committee of Weights and Measures (CIPM) to revise the entire SI by linking all seven base units to seven constants [10, 11].

In a recent IUPAC Technical Report [8], a thorough analysis of the discussion on the impact of the proposed new definitions of two key units for chemists was undertaken: the kilogram and the mole. The present recommendation focuses on the unit mole. In Section 2 a brief summary of the discussion is recalled, in Section 3 the recommended definition of the mole is formulated, and in Section 4 some additional remarks and explanations are presented.

2 Discussion

Since the proposals for a new definition of the mole were put forward, a major division of opinions among chemists was whether to retain the current definition based on the mass of carbon-12 or to adopt a definition that is based on a fixed value of the Avogadro constant.

The amount of chemical substances is traditionally measured by mass or volume. Since the introduction of relative atomic masses (also called "atomic weights") by Dalton (see for example [12]), chemists are able to express their observations in a quantity that is proportional to the number of elementary entities. The unit of the SI quantity "amount of substance" in its present definition still relies on the mass of the international prototype kilogram [4]:

"1. The mole is the amount of substance of a system which contains as many elementary entities as there are atoms in 0.012 kg of carbon 12; its symbol is "mol".

2. When the mole is used, the elementary entities must be specified and may be atoms, molecules, ions, electrons, other particles, or specified groups of such particles."

Thus, the 1971 definition refers to well-defined number of atoms in a certain fixed mass of carbon-12. With the recent advances in science and measurement practice, our ability to determine the value of the Avogadro constant has now reached a level of relative uncertainty that allows a redefinition of the mole in terms of the explicit number of elementary entities. While this conceptual change does not bring any immediate practical benefits to our ability to better realize the mole, it realigns the definition of the mole with the way most chemists understand it [8].

3 The definition

The amount of substance, symbol n, is a measure of the number of specified elementary entities. An elementary entity may be an atom, a molecule, an ion, an electron, any other particle or specified group of particles.

> **The mole, symbol mol, is the SI unit of amount of substance. One mole contains exactly $6.022\,140\,8Y \times 10^{23}$ elementary entities. This number is called the Avogadro number.**

The effect of the above definition of the mole is that it fixes the value of the Avogadro constant to be $N_A = 6.022\,140\,8Y \times 10^{23}\ \text{mol}^{-1}$. The symbol Y signifies the yet undecided digits which will be set by the CODATA Task Group on Fundamental Constants prior to the 26th CGPM in 2018.

The amount of B, $n(B)$, is proportional to the number of entities of B, $N(B)$, with

$$n(B) = N_A^{-1}\ N(B)$$

The proportionality factor is a universal physical constant that is independent of the nature of the substance. Its reciprocal, N_A, is the Avogadro constant which is the same for all substances. The stipulated Avogadro number, $\{N_A\} = 602\,214\,08Y \times 10^{14}$, is an integer and will be the numerical value of the fixed Avogadro constant, $N_A = 6.022\,140\,8Y \times 10^{23}\ \text{mol}^{-1}$. The Avogadro constant has the SI unit mol^{-1}, because the amount of substance n is a base quantity with the SI unit mol and because the number of entities, being a number, is a quantity of dimension one. The amount of B, $n(B)$, is also proportional to the mass of B, $m(B)$, with

$$n(B) = M(B)^{-1}\ m(B)$$

The proportionality factor is the reciprocal of the molar mass, $M(B)$, which is a characteristic constant of the substance B.

The 1971 definition of the mole implies that the Avogadro number is the ratio of the gram to the dalton, with the value of the dalton expressed in gram. The historical continuity of the present definition preserves this relation to within an uncertainty negligible for practical purposes.

4 Explanatory remarks

A better understanding of the above definition requires some explanation and guidance. Below are some remarks that might help the reader to gain a better understanding of the above definition.

1. Although the full name of the quantity is the amount of substance, the word "substance" is a placeholder and should be replaced with the name of the actual substance referred. Thus, for example, one speaks of the amount of water, and not the amount of substance of water.
2. The name "amount of substance" is not universally liked and this quantity is sometimes also called "chemical amount" [13, 8]. A thorough examination of the potential alternative name for the quantity amount of substance, n, has to be performed.
3. The 1971 definition of the mole applies only to an ensemble of unbound atoms at rest and at zero kelvin temperature. While this stipulation is often ignored, the new definition of the mole decouples the mole from the kilogram and therefore the accompanying stipulation that the atoms must be in the unbound state is no longer required. Thus, one can say that 0.012 kg of pure carbon-12 in the form of graphite is not *exactly* 1 mol under either the 1971 definition or the new definition.

The molar mass of any entity B, $M(B)$, may still be obtained from its relative atomic mass (also called "atomic weight"), $A_r(B)$, from the equation

$$M(\text{B}) = A_\text{r}(\text{B})\, M(^{12}\text{C})/12 = A_\text{r}(\text{B})\, M_\text{u}$$

where M_u is the molar mass constant, equal to $M(^{12}\text{C})/12$. Because the molar mass of unbound carbon-12, $M(^{12}\text{C})$, is no longer 12 g mol^{-1} exactly, the molar mass constant, M_u, is no longer 1 g mol^{-1} exactly. The uncertainty of M_u, being smaller than 1 part in 10^9, however, is of no practical relevance in chemistry. Within this uncertainty, the value of M_u remains 1 g mol^{-1}. The molar mass of any entity B is also related to the mass of the elementary entity, $m(\text{B})$, by the equation

$$M(\text{B}) = N_\text{A}\, m(\text{B}) = N_\text{A}\, A_\text{r}(\text{B})\, m_\text{u}$$

where m_u is the atomic mass constant equal to the atomic mass of carbon-12 divided by 12, $m_\text{a}(^{12}\text{C})/12$. Both M_u and m_u are related to the Avogadro constant through the equation $M_\text{u} = N_\text{A}\, m_\text{u}$.

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