Dispersion curves in the diffusional instability of autocatalytic reaction fronts

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A (linear) stability analysis of planar reaction fronts to transverse perturbations is considered for systems based on cubic autocatalysis and a model for the chlorite-tetrahionate reaction. Dispersion curves (plots of the growth rate $\sigma$ against a transverse wave-number $k$) are obtained. In both cases it is seen that there is a nonzero value $D_0$ of $D$ (the ratio of the diffusion coefficients of autocatalyst and substrate) at which $\sigma_{\text{max}}$, the maximum value of $\sigma$ for a given value of $D$, achieves its largest value, with $\sigma_{\text{max}}$ being less for other values of $D$ and becoming small as $D$ decreases to zero. The existence of the optimum value $D_0$ for initiating a diffusional instability is confirmed, in the cubic autocatalysis case, by an asymptotic analysis for small wave numbers.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is already well-established, both experimentally [1–3] and theoretically [4,5], that planar reaction fronts in autocatalytic systems can become transversely unstable if the diffusion coefficients of substrate and autocatalyst differ by a sufficient amount. Much of this previous work has been concerned with the iodate-arsenous acid (IAA) system, for which cubic autocatalysis is a good approximation in the arsenuous acid excess case [6]. It is this latter reaction we consider in detail, namely,

$$A + 2B \rightarrow 3B \quad \text{rate } k_0 ab^2,$$

where $a$ and $b$ are the concentrations of $A$ and $B$, respectively, and $k_0$ is a constant. For the IAA system, $A$ and $B$ represent, respectively, $\text{IO}_3^-$ and $\Gamma$. The dimensionless reaction-diffusion equations corresponding to reaction (1) are (see, [7,8], for example)

$$\frac{\partial a}{\partial t} = \nabla^2 a - ab^2, \quad \frac{\partial b}{\partial t} = D\nabla^2 b + ab^2,$$

where $D=D_B/D_A$ is the ratio of the diffusion coefficients of reactant species $B$ and $A$. Ahead of the reaction front there is only $A$ present and, in the front, $A$ is converted fully to $B$.

The basic idea, as described clearly in [4], is that the diffusion of the autocatalyst $B$ has a stabilizing effect on planar waves, whereas the diffusion of the substrate $A$ has a destabilizing effect. Thus if this latter effect is sufficiently strong relative to the first, i.e., if the ratio $D$ is sufficiently different from unity, then the wave will become transversely unstable. This leads to a critical value $D_c$ of $D$ at which the stability of a planar wave changes, with, in the present description (2), the wave being unstable for $D < D_c$. For cubic autocatalysis it has been shown [5] that $D_c \approx 0.435$.

From this argument, it might be expected that the instability should strengthen as the difference $|D_c - D|$ increases, as exemplified, for example, by increasing (positive) growth rates $\sigma$ derived in a linear stability analysis. We find that this is not the case when we compute the dispersion curves, i.e., plots of $\sigma$ against a transverse wave-number $k$ for a given value of $D$. We see that the maximum value of the growth rate $\sigma_{\text{max}}$ starts by increasing as $D$ is reduced from $D_c$. However, a value of $D_0$ of $D$ is reached at which point $\sigma_{\text{max}}$ achieves its greatest value, with $\sigma_{\text{max}}$ being less for other values of $D$ and becoming small as $D$ decreases to zero. The existence of the optimum value $D_0$ for initiating a diffusional instability is confirmed, in the cubic autocatalysis case, by an asymptotic analysis for small wave numbers.

II. STABILITY ANALYSIS

We have in mind the experiments performed in hele-Shaw cells and the consequent theory, see [10–13], for example. This allows us to restrict attention to two space variables, $x$ in the direction of propagation and $y$ transverse to the reaction front. The planar traveling waves, the base state for our stability analysis, are determined from Eq. (2) by first introducing the traveling coordinate $\xi = x - ct$, where $c > 0$ is the (constant) wave speed and then looking for a solution in the form

$$a(x,y,t) = a_0(\xi), \quad b(x,y,t) = b_0(\xi).$$

The resulting traveling wave equations are

$$a''_0 + ca'_0 - a_0b_0^2 = 0, \quad Db''_0 + cb'_0 + a_0b_0^2 = 0,$$

(4)

where primes denote differentiation with respect to $\xi$, being subject to the boundary conditions

$$a_0 \rightarrow 1, \quad b_0 \rightarrow 0 \quad \text{as } \xi \rightarrow \infty, \quad a_0 \rightarrow 0, \quad b_0 \rightarrow 1 \quad \text{as } \xi \rightarrow -\infty.$$

Equations (4) and (5) have already been discussed in some detail [9,8]. For completeness we show a graph of the wave speed $c$ plotted against $D$ in Fig. 1. We note that $c \approx 1.219D + \cdots$ as $D \rightarrow 0$ [9] (shown by the broken line in Fig. 1).

To consider the diffusional stability of the reaction fronts given by Eqs. (4) and (5), we put

$$A + 2B \rightarrow 3B \quad \text{rate } k_0 ab^2,$$
of the growth rate problem, which was solved using the Equations

\[ a(\zeta, t) = a_0(\zeta) + A(\zeta, t), \quad b(\zeta, t) = b_0(\zeta) + B(\zeta, t), \]

where we assume that \( A, B \) are small perturbations. We substitute Eq. (6) into Eqs. (2) and look for a solution in the form

\[ A(\zeta, t) = e^{\alpha t + iky}A(\zeta), \quad B(\zeta, t) = e^{\alpha t + iky}B(\zeta). \]

This leads to an eigenvalue problem for \([A(\zeta), B(\zeta)]\) in terms of the growth rate \( \alpha \) and the wave-number \( k \) as

\[
\begin{align*}
\tilde{A}' + c\tilde{A} &= -(b_0^2 + k^2 + \sigma)\tilde{A} - 2a_0b_0\tilde{B} = 0 \\
DB\tilde{B}' + c\tilde{B}' &= -(Dk^2 - 2a_0b_0 + \sigma)\tilde{B} + b_0^2\tilde{A} = 0
\end{align*}
\]

subject to the boundary conditions that

\[ \tilde{A} \to 0, \quad \tilde{B} \to 0, \quad \text{as} \quad \zeta \to \pm \infty. \]

We note in passing that, when \( D=1, a_0 + b_0 = 1, \quad \tilde{A} + \tilde{B} = 0 \) and, as a consequence, \( \sigma = -k^2 \).

For general values of \( D \), Eqs. (8)–(10) had to be solved numerically, which was done using the technique described in [13,14]. The traveling wave Eqs. (4) and (5) were solved using a shooting technique incorporating the asymptotic forms of the solution for \( |\zeta| \) large. The concentration profiles were then specified at \( N \) points with equally spacing \( \Delta \zeta \). Equations (8) and (9) were then discretized at these \( N \) points using central-difference approximations for the derivatives. This converts the system to an \( N \times N \) matrix eigenvalue problem, which was solved using the LAPACK solver DGEEVX. For our results we generally used \( N = 500 \) and \( \Delta \zeta = 0.1 \), although some cases were calculated with a larger \( N \) (and smaller \( \Delta \zeta \)) to check accuracy. From these calculations the largest eigenvalue \( \sigma \) is determined for a given value of the wave-number \( k \). Repeating these calculations for different values of the wave number enables the dispersion curves to be plotted.

In Fig. 2 we plot dispersion curves for a range of values of \( D \). In Fig. 2(a) (for \( D=1 \) to \( D=0.1 \)) we see that the reaction front becomes transversely unstable, i.e., \( \sigma > 0 \) for a range of \( k \), at a value between \( D=0.5 \) and \( D=0.4 \), consistent with [5]. Also, the (positive) maximum value of \( \sigma \) increases as \( D \) is decreased to \( D=0.1 \). In Fig. 2(b) we give dispersion curves for \( D=1.0 \) to \( D=0.025 \). In this case we see that \( \sigma_{\text{max}} \) decreases as \( D \) is decreased from \( D=0.1 \), although the range of unstable wave numbers is increasing. The maximum value of \( \sigma \) has become relatively small by \( D=0.025 \) and suggests that possibly \( \sigma_{\text{max}} \to 0 \) as \( D \to 0 \) (a point that is confirmed below). To emphasise this point we give the values of \( \sigma_{\text{max}} \) obtained from these dispersion curves against \( D \) in Fig. 3(a).

This figure indicates that \( \sigma_{\text{max}} \) achieves its greatest value at \( D=0.025 \). (Note that we have plotted \( 10^2 \times \sigma_{\text{max}} \) in this figure.) In Fig. 3(b) we give the corresponding values of the wave-number \( k_{\text{max}} \) where \( \sigma = \sigma_{\text{max}} \). The figure shows that \( k_{\text{max}} \) decreases as \( D \) increases as (seen in Fig. 2), from \( k_{\text{max}} \approx 0.249 \) at \( D=0.025 \) to \( k_{\text{max}} \approx 0.073 \) at \( D=0.4 \).

We can gain further insight into the nature of these dispersion curves by considering the solution to Eqs. (8) and (9) for \( k \) small, which is what we now do.

### A. Solution for small wave numbers

We look for a solution to Eqs. (8)–(10) (for \( D \neq 1 \)) valid for \( k \) small by expanding
applying the boundary conditions that note that, on adding the equations, integrating once and
Before examining the solution to Eqs. (11)

At $O(k^2)$ we obtain, using Eq. (12),

$$A''_1 + cA'_1 + DB'_1 + cB_1 = (\sigma_0 +1)(a_0 - 1) + (\sigma_0 + D)b_0.$$  \hspace{1cm} (14)

Equation (14) shows that we cannot also apply the boundary conditions that $A_1 \to 0, B_1 \to 0$ as $\zeta \to \infty$. The most we can do is to satisfy

$$A_1 \to 0, \quad B_1 \to \frac{(D-1)}{c} \text{ as } \zeta \to \infty.$$  \hspace{1cm} (15)

Conditions (15) reflect the singular nature of the solution to Eqs. (8) and (9) as $k \to 0$. To complete the solution an outer region is required in which

$$Y = k^2\zeta, \quad a_0 = 0, \quad b_0 = 1, \quad A = 0, \quad B = k^2\tilde{B}(Y; k),$$

$$\sigma = k^2\tilde{\sigma}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (16)

The resulting equation for $\tilde{B}$ is

$$k^2\tilde{B}'' + c\tilde{B}' - (\tilde{\sigma} + D)\tilde{B} = 0.$$  \hspace{1cm} (17)

In Eq. (17) primes denote differentiation with respect to $Y$. A solution is sought by expanding in powers of $k^2$, the leading order solution $\tilde{B}_0$ is, on matching with Eq. (15) and using Eq. (11)

$$\tilde{B}_0 = \frac{(D-1)}{c} \exp\left(\frac{(\sigma_0 + D)}{c}Y\right).$$  \hspace{1cm} (18)

We note that $\tilde{B}_0 \to 0$ as $Y \to -\infty$ and is consistent with the behavior, as $\zeta \to \infty$, of the solution to the equations that arise at $O(k^4)$ in expansion (11).

We now return to Eqs. (13). We note that $A_1 = a_0', B_1 = b_0'$ is a solution to the homogeneous problem satisfying homogeneous boundary conditions. Thus a compatibility condition is required for the nonhomogeneous problem to have a solution which satisfies all the boundary conditions. It is this condition that determines the constant $\sigma_0$. To derive this condition we need to consider the adjoint problem [16] (Theorem 2.2, page 307). To do so we start by writing Eqs. (13) in the form

$$d\sigma$$.  \hspace{1cm} (19)

We then write $w_1 = e^{\xi}A_1', w_2 = De^{\xi}B_1'$ and express Eqs. (19) as the system of first-order equations

$$u' = Mu + R,$$  \hspace{1cm} (20)

where
This graph shows that \( \sigma_0 = 0 \) at \( D = 0.4236 \). (This value was obtained by refining the numerical procedure to take very small increments in \( D \) around this value.) The graph also shows that \( \sigma_0 \rightarrow 0 \) as \( D \rightarrow 0 \), and that \( \sigma_0 \) reaches its maximum value of \( \sigma_0 = 0.34 \) at \( D = 0.16 \). These results are consistent with [5] and the dispersion curves shown in Fig. 2. These dispersion curves have a “parabolic” appearance in the unstable region. This suggests that we could use \( \sigma_0 \) as an alternative measure of the strength of the diffusional instability (note that \( \sigma \sim \sigma_0 k^2 \) for \( k \) small and so \( \sigma_0 \) gives the “slope” of the dispersion curve at the origin). Using this criterion, our results indicate that \( D_0 = 0.16 \) is the optimum value of \( D \) for the growth of a diffusional instability.

### B. Solution for \( D \) small

The results shown in Fig. 2 (and in Fig. 6 below) suggest that \( \sigma \) becomes small as \( D \) decreases toward zero. We can obtain a solution valid for \( D \ll 1 \) following directly on from the approach used in [9] for the traveling wave equations. The transformation \( a_0(\zeta) = D\tilde{a}_0(\zeta) \), \( c = \zeta D \) was applied in [9] to obtain the leading order equations for the traveling wave solution in the inner region

\[
\tilde{a}_0'' - \tilde{a}_0 b_0' = 0, \quad b_0'' + \tilde{c} b_0 + \tilde{a}_0 b_0^2 = 0,
\]

subject to the boundary conditions that

\[
\tilde{a}_0 \rightarrow 0, \quad b_0 \rightarrow 1 \text{ as } \zeta \rightarrow -\infty, \quad \tilde{a}_0 \sim \tilde{c} \zeta + \cdots, \quad b_0 \rightarrow 0 \text{ as } \zeta \rightarrow \infty.
\]

An outer region, in which \( \zeta = D\zeta, \quad b_0 = D^2 \tilde{b}_0 \) is then required to complete the solution. However, it is the solution in the inner region that determines \( \tilde{c} \) ([9] found \( \tilde{c} = 1.219 \)) and it is this region that concerns us for the stability analysis.

In the inner region we also put \( \sigma = D\tilde{\sigma}, \quad \tilde{A} = D\tilde{A} \), which results in the leading order equations for the stability analysis for \( D \ll 1 \) from Eqs. (8) and (9).
\[ \ddot{A}'' - (b_0^2 + k^2)\dot{A} - 2\ddot{a}_0b_0\dot{B} = 0, \]
\[ \ddot{B}'' + c\ddot{B}' + b_0^2\dot{A} + (2\ddot{a}_0\dot{b}_0 - k^2 - \ddot{a})\dot{B} = 0, \]  
(27)

still subject to conditions (10). Equations (27) were solved numerically using the traveling wave solution given by Eqs. (25) and (26), to determine \( \ddot{\sigma} \) in terms of \( k \), with a graph of \( \ddot{\sigma} \) being given in Fig. 5. This graph has a similar shape to those given in Fig. 2, although now \( \sigma = D\ddot{\sigma} \). Values of \( \ddot{\sigma} \) reach a maximum value of \( \ddot{\sigma}_{\text{max}} = 0.0772 \), so that \( \ddot{\sigma}_{\text{max}} \) differ from those in Fig. 3(a) by the broken line and shows reasonable agreement with the results for the smaller values of \( D \). The graph also shows that \( \ddot{\sigma} = 0 \) at \( k = 0.494 \), which provides an upper bound for the possibility of unstable wave numbers.

### III. DISCUSSION

We have established, both through the numerical calculation of dispersion curves and by analysis for small wave numbers, that there is an optimum value \( D_0 \) of \( D \) (the ratio of the diffusion coefficients of autocatalyst to substrate) for the generation of a diffusional instability. By this we mean that, with \( D = D_0 \), the growth rates \( \sigma \) arising in a linear stability analysis achieve their largest values, with only smaller maximum growth rates being reached for other values of \( D \). In fact, we have shown that the growth rates are of \( O(D) \) for \( D \) small, with \( \sigma_{\text{max}} \) differing from those in Fig. 3(a) by the broken line and shows reasonable agreement with the results for the smaller values of \( D \). The graph also shows that \( \ddot{\sigma} = 0 \) at \( k = 0.494 \), which provides an upper bound for the possibility of unstable wave numbers.

A diffusional instability arises when the flux of the reactant is sufficiently greater than that of the autocatalyst. When the diffusion coefficient of the autocatalyst is decreased (smaller values of \( D \)) the overlap of reactant and autocatalyst decreases, resulting in lower reaction rates and slower front speeds (see Fig. 1). Thus there are two counteracting effects. Whereas the decrease in the flux of the autocatalyst favors the instability, the decrease in the reaction rates for the autocatalysis leads to a weaker feedback, tending to slow the growth of the instability. This latter effect becomes more pronounced at the smaller values of \( D \) and accounts for the increase in \( \sigma \) at these values (as in Figs. 2, 3, and 6). Applying electric fields to the system has been shown previously to lead to similar effects, producing changes in the concentration fluxes and consequent changes in the stability characteristics, see, for example, [17–19].

Our discussion has concentrated on cubic autocatalysis (1) and an obvious question is whether the optimum value \( D_0 > 0 \) of \( D \) for initiating a diffusional instability is particular to this system or a more general feature. To go a little way to address this point we also computed dispersion curves for the chlorite-tetrathionate (CT) system, which we modeled by a two-variable reaction mechanism for the species \( [S_2O_3^{2-}] = a \) and \( [H^+] = b \) [15]. In dimensionless variables this results in the reaction-diffusion equations [13] [following (2)]

\[ \frac{\partial a}{\partial t} = \nabla^2 a - ab^2(\kappa + 7a), \quad \frac{\partial b}{\partial t} = D\nabla^2 b + 6ab^2(\kappa + 7a), \]

where we took \( \kappa = 1 \) in the computations (following [13]). The planar traveling wave solutions to Eq. (28) have already been fully discussed in [13] and we used these as our base state in a linear stability analysis for transverse diffusional instabilities. The resulting dispersion curves are shown in Fig. 6. In Fig. 6(a) we give the curves for \( D = 1.0 \) to \( D = 0.2 \). This figure shows that an instability develops at the smaller values of \( k \) and that \( \sigma \) reaches a maximum value of \( \sigma = 0.0772 \) as \( D \rightarrow 0 \). This result appears contrary to the argument previously employed in [4] to show the possibility of diffusional instabilities. This argument is essentially the same as that given for a Turing instability and, in this scenario, the system does become increasingly unstable (in the sense we have used) as it moves away from criticality.

[FIG. 6. Dispersion curves for the chlorite-tetrathionate system (28), plots of \( \sigma \) against \( k \), (a) for \( D = 1.0 \) to \( D = 0.2 \), (b) for \( D = 0.2 \) to \( D = 0.0025 \).]
$D$ is decreased. Again the growth rates $\sigma$ become small as $D$ gets very small. For the CT system there is also the existence of a (nonzero) optimum value $D_0$ (here $D_0=0.2$) at which $\sigma_{\text{max}}$ achieves its largest value, hence making the system most unstable at this value of $D$.

Although our results are for two relatively simple chemical systems (IAA and CT), they do suggest that the existence of a nonzero value of the ratio of diffusion coefficients at which the system is most unstable to diffusional instabilities could well be a general feature of this type of system.

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