Selective enhancement of $1s2s2p\ 4P_f$ metastable states populated by cascades in single-electron transfer collisions of $F^7+ (1s^2/1s2s\ 3S)$ ions with He and $H_2$ targets

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Received 24 December 2007; published 9 May 2008

A mechanism for the selective population of $1s2s2p\ 4P_f$ states by electron capture in energetic collisions of $F^7+ (1s^2/1s2s\ 3S)$ ions with $H_2$ and He is elucidated. Capture calculations indicate $(1s2s^3S)nl\ 2L$ doublet and quartet levels to be approximately evenly populated for $n=2–5$. Following capture the doublets Auger decay strongly to the $1s^2$ ground state allowing for negligible feeding of other lower-lying doublets by radiative transitions. The quartets, however, find this decay channel blocked by spin conservation and instead radiatively cascade through lower lying quartets, eventually strongly populating the lowest-lying $1s2s2p\ 4P_f$ levels in agreement with older experimental results for collision energies above 0.7 MeV/u.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevA.77.050701

PACS number(s): 34.70.+e, 32.70.Fw, 32.80.Hd, 34.50.Fa

Over the last decades considerable progress has been made in obtaining information on both the atomic structure and dynamics of multiply excited states using high resolution optical [1] and Auger electron spectroscopy [2,3]. This interest has generated to a large degree in the fields of plasma physics, thermonuclear fusion research, and astrophysics where the collisional properties of highly stripped ions play an important role.

The determination of highly accurate excitation energies, transition rates, and lifetimes combined with production cross section information obtained from line intensity measurements lead to a better overall understanding of the dominant processes at play. Very often, however, the dominant mechanism is complemented by additional processes usually considered of secondary importance. Here, we call attention to such a secondary mechanism and show how it can lead to the strong selective enhancement of a particular multiply excited state thus affecting the overall interpretation of its production. This mechanism can be quite general, minimally requiring the availability of a population of highly excited states, some of which need to be metastable. A detailed analysis is provided by an example involving the production of highly excited $(1s2s^3S)nl\ 2L$ and quartet $4L$ states (with $L=\ell$) in collisions of $F^7+$ ions with $H_2$ and He targets.

The dominant process leading to the production of the $(1s2s^3S)nl\ 2L$ states is direct single $nl$ electron capture into the $F^7+ (1s2s^3S)$ component of the ion beam. In low-$Z$ He-like ion beams such as $F^7+$, it is well known that due to the long lifetimes of the $(1s2s^3S)$ states appreciable admixtures of this state can exist together with the $1s^2$ ground state in the collision. While the doublet $2L$ states have mostly femtosecond lifetimes decaying promptly, the $4L$ states are 10–1000 times longer lived. This metastability arises largely from spin conservation rules forbidding the conversion of a spin quartet to a doublet by either radiative or Auger deexcitation. This rule eliminates “cross feeding” between the two series, which thus are assumed to evolve independently in time.

The lowest-lying level of the quartet $(1s2s^3S)nl\ 4L$ series, the $1s2s2p\ 4P$ state, is the most metastable with lifetimes in the nanosecond range. In the absence of strong spin-orbit interactions, as in the case of low-$Z$ ions, the $1s2s2p\ 4P_f$ states can only decay to the ground state through much weaker spin-spin interactions or higher-multipole radiative transitions [4]. It thus acts as a kind of “excited” ground state collecting the population of all higher-lying quartet states through a chain of radiative transitions mediated by other quartets, eventually leading to its enhanced production. It is important to also realize that the lowest-lying levels of the doublet $(1s2s^3S)nl\ 2L$ series, the $1s2s2p\ 4P_z$ states, will be relatively much less affected by the cascade-feeding process since most of the available population is quickly siphoned away via the much stronger direct Auger and/or radiative decays to the ground state. Thus, the $4P$ states become selectively enhanced relative to the $2P_z$ states as demonstrated in this analysis.

The mechanisms for the production of the $1s2s2p\ 4P$ states in low-$Z$ ion-atom collisions have been of continuous interest. However, even though the importance of cascade feeding mechanisms have been mentioned or even discussed to some extent [5–10], their significance has gone largely unnoticed, probably due to the lack of detailed supporting evidence. More recently, Tanis et al. [11] invoked a process named the Pauli exchange interaction to explain the observed nonstatistical enhancement of the ratio of $1s2s2p\ 4P$ to $1s2s2p\ 2P_z$ states in the collision of $F^7+$ ions with He targets. Alternatively, Zouros et al. [12] recognized the importance of the cascade-feeding mechanism in resolving the long standing discrepancy of more than a factor of 10 between theory and experiment in the production of the $1s2s2p\ 4P$ state by transfer loss in collision of Li-like $O^{7+}(1s^22s)$ and $F^{10+}(1s^22s)$ ions with He and $H_2$. However, they left unanswered the important question as to why the additionally observed $1s2s2p\ 2P_z$ states were not also similarly enhanced. The proposed selective cascade-feeding mechanism provides a clear answer to both cases. Strohschein et al. [13] very recently have reported results on the $C^{+}+\text{He}$ system in which the nonstatistical enhancement of the $4P$ is attributed equally to Pauli exchange and to feeding by cascades in partial agreement with results reported here.

In this Rapid Communication, we investigate theoretically.

PHYSICAL REVIEW A 77, 050701(R) (2008)

RAPID COMMUNICATIONS

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevA.77.050701

PACS number(s): 34.70.+e, 32.70.Fw, 32.80.Hd, 34.50.Fa

1050-2947/2008/77(5)/050701(4) 050701-1 ©2008 The American Physical Society
Auger electron emission from the $F^\text{6+}(1s2s2p)^3P$ and $^2P_\pm$ states produced in 0.25–2 MeV/u collisions of $F^\text{7+}$ ions with He and $H_2$ gas targets. Our results are compared to the extensive zero-degree Auger projectile spectroscopy [3] data of Lee et al. [5]. Our detailed continuum distorted wave (CDW) [14] and classical trajectory Monte Carlo (CTMC) [15] results indicate that a substantial number of 1s2snl $^2L$ Rydberg levels with $n=2–7$ are populated by single nl electron transfer to the 1s2s $^3S$ ion beam component. An in-depth analysis of the radiative feeding by cascades based on Hartree-Fock calculations of all radiative ($E1$) and Auger transitions for $n=5$ is presented, definitively demonstrating the importance and selectivity of the cascade-feeding mechanism.

In Fig. 1, total capture cross sections $\sigma_n$ are shown as a function of the principal quantum number $n$. The effective ion charge seen by each shell was computed using Slater screening [16] known to improve capture results [14]. Thus, an ion charge of $q=7.8$ was assumed for nl electron capture into 2s, 2p orbitals, $q=7.15$ for 3s, 3p, and $q=7$ for 3d and higher. $\sigma_n$ is seen to be important and rather evenly distributed over the entire $n=2–7$ range even at the highest collision energies where inner shell capture dominates. CTMC are nonperturbative calculations, typically applicable at lower collision energies [17]. Applied at 0.25, 0.5, and 1.1 MeV/u in good overall agreement with the CDW, they provide additional support as to the accuracy of the capture cross sections.

We use the well-known COWAN Hartree-Fock package [18,19] to calculate all relevant $F^\text{6+}(1s2snl)^2L_J$ Li-like energy levels, including dipole and Auger transition rates for principal quantum number $2 \leq n \leq 5$ and $l=0, n-1$ with more accurate rates for $n=2,3$ transitions from Refs. [4,20]. In Fig. 2 the energy level scheme with transition rates is shown. The underlying selective cascade-feeding mechanism becomes instantly apparent. The (1s2s $^3S$)nl $^2L$ doubles are

![Image of energy level scheme]
found to Auger decay strongly to the $K$ shell (thick slanted blue transition lines), while the $(1s2s^2S)nl$ $^4L$ quartets cannot as they are blocked by spin selection rules. Radiative $E1$ transitions, however, are readily allowed, but only to lower lying quartets. Thus, radiative branching ratios, $B_{rad}$ for transitions between quartets are much larger than for corresponding transitions between doublets, effectively resulting in the strong feeding by cascades of the lowest lying $1s2s2p$ $^4P$ states only.

Separate quartet and doublet cascade transition matrices were constructed and a detailed time-dependent analysis [21] of the cascade-feeding process was performed using the computed capture cross sections to provide the initial $t=0$ populations. The individual $(1s2s^2S)nl$ $^2S_{1/2}$ initial level populations were determined by spin and angular momentum coupling statistics which lead to the well-known $2:1$ ratio of $^4L$ to $^2L$ configuration populations [22]. An example of the computed time dependence is shown in Fig. 3 providing quantitative support for the proposed selective cascade-feeding mechanism. We note that a mixed $(1s^2/1s2s^2S)$ component He-like beam also allows for the population of the $1s2s2p$ $^2P$ levels by non-negligible transfer excitation (TE) from the $F^{7+}(1s^2)$ ground state [5] included here.

In Fig. 4 our results are compared to the $0^\circ$ Auger electron emission single differential cross sections (SDCS) measurements of Lee et al. [5] based on the metastable beam fractions determined by Teresawa et al. [23]. It is not clear to
what extent dealignment effects at 0° observation [24,25]
should also be considered given possible redistribution of
magnetic substate populations due to feeding by cascades
[26]. When included just for 2p capture they were found to
affect Auger yields within a factor of 2, particularly for He.
Best overall agreement, however, was found assuming as-
sertion as shown here. For the H₂ target, the distinct hump in
the doublet SDCS due to resonant transfer excitation (RTE)
[5] is nicely reproduced by our calculations [3,27]. With
decreasing collision energy below 0.7 MeV/u, feeding by cas-
cades becomes increasingly more intense and even the 1s2s2p 2P± levels start to receive some cascade contribu-
tions. Our cascade analysis for n ≤ 5 is found to seriously
underestimate both quartet and doublet production at low
energy, while for He it is also as good. However, below 0.7 MeV/u, the effect of the already observed disagreement in the absolute values of the computed SDCS is clearly evident.

In conclusion, we give a detailed analysis demonstrating
the existence of a selective cascade-feeding mechanism re-
sulting in the preferential population of low-lying long-lived
metastable levels. For the particular collision system re-
ported here, at collision energies above 0.7 MeV/u, this
mechanism is found to be largely responsible for the recently
reported nonstatistical enhancement of the 1s2s2p 4P states
[11]. Below 0.7 MeV/u, our understanding of both 2P± and
4P production seems incomplete and further investigation is
clearly necessary to understand the large discrepancies be-
tween theory and experiment. These results also underscore
the significance of cascades, especially when metastable
states are involved.

We would like to thank Dr. A. E. Kramida for his gener-
ous help with the COWAN code for the PC [19] and K. R.
Karim, T. W. Gorczyca, J. A. Tanis, T. Kirchner, and S. T.
Manson for useful communications. This work was sup-
ported by Greek-Hungarian S&T Grant No. GR-11/03, the
grant “Boylai” from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and
OTKA Grants No. T046905 and No. IN64319.

Physics Techniques and Applications, edited by S. M. Shafroth
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tion cross section value of Refs. [11,13].