Anomalous intensity dependence of optical reorientation in azo-dye-doped nematic liquid crystals

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The intensity dependence of optical nonlinearity in a nematic liquid crystal doped with an azo-dye is investigated. The reorientational part of the nonlinearity changes from self-defocusing to self-focusing character while the intensity passes through the saturation value of trans-cis photoisomerization. This observation, in accordance with previous models, indicates that the optical torque generated by the trans-isomers is of opposite sign than the torque generated by the cis-isomers. At very low intensities a further reorientational nonlinearity was found, which is attributed to light-induced orientational redistribution of adsorbed molecules at the surface.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The nonlinear optical properties of dye-doped liquid crystals attracted much interest in the last decade [1]. In particular, the photoinduced enhancement of optical torque (sometimes called the Janossy effect) was studied in detail [2,3]. It was found that while the optical reorientation is driven entirely by the anisotropy of the director polarizibility in transparent nematic liquid crystals, an additional “photoinduced” torque is present with doped nematics. According to experiments, samples doped with anthergaquinone dyes have a photoinduced torque with the same dependence on the angle between the director and the optical field as the optical torque. Its magnitude is determined, however, by a dimensionless parameter $\zeta$, which we will call the dopant factor [4]. The dopant factor is proportional to the dye concentration and relies strongly on the molecular structure of the dye. Depending on the dye, it can be positive or negative; in the latter case the optical field tends to orient the director perpendicularly to the electric field vector of the light beam. This effect has been successfully explained by taking into account the modification of guest-host interaction during electronic excitations of dye molecules [5–8].

The situation is more complex in the case of azo dopants, which are capable of light-induced conformational transitions. As first noted by Barnik et al. [9], with azo-dye doped nematics, the dopant factor changes sign from negative to positive when the angle between the light polarization and the director is varied from 90° to 0°. A similar change of sign is also obtained at a fixed angle of incidence by superposing an ordinarily polarized beam on the reorienting extraordinary ray [10,11]. These phenomena were shown to be a result of trans:cis photoisomerization. The trans and cis isomers independently have negative and positive contributions to the photoinduced torques, respectively [10]. The photoinduced trans:cis ratio depends on the angle between the pump polarization and the director; in particular the fraction of the cis molecules increases when this angle is decreased and so does the impact of those isomers, thereby shifting the torque towards positive values.

An additional anomaly takes place in nematics doped with the azo-dye methyl-red, where self-diffraction was observed at very low intensity levels (below 1 mW/cm²) [12]. The mechanism of this “supranonlineal” effect has not been yet been fully explained. It has been suggested that this effect is the result of a photorefractive-like behavior in the doped liquid crystal [12]. An alternative explanation involves surface realignment of the director [13].

In the present paper the intensity dependence of optical reorientation is reported for an azo-dye-doped nematic. In these experiments the light intensity was varied from low values, at which the dye molecules were primarily in the trans state, to high values where the cis concentration is saturated. This investigation is interesting for two reasons. First, if the interpretation of the angular dependence of the torque is correct, at low intensities, where the trans configuration is dominant, one should observe a negative torque. As the intensity is increased, the fraction of the cis component also increases, therefore the torque should become more positive and may even change its sign above a critical intensity. The observation of this effect would give strong support to the models reported earlier. Second, measurements at low

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intensities can reveal if there is any additional mechanism of director reorientation, similar to the supranonlinearp effect reported in the case of methyl-red.

II. EXPERIMENT

The experiments were carried out in planar cells of the nematic mixture E63, supplied by British Drug House, doped by 0.2 w/w % of Disperse Orange 3. It was shown earlier for this system that in the planar geometry the total optical torque is positive at the high-intensity limit [11]. Therefore we expect to observe sign-inversion of the optical torque when the light intensity is increased from low values to values well above the saturation intensity of photoisomerization.

As a first step, we performed pump-probe transmission measurements, which allowed us to determine the saturation intensity [14]. The pump and the probe beams were from two argon ion lasers tuned to $\lambda=488$ nm. The pump and probe beam diameters were 2 and 0.5 mm, respectively. The angle of incidence of the pump beam with the normal of the sample was 45°, the angle between the pump and probe was approximately 2°.

The light-induced optical phase shift was also measured with a pump-probe setup. The probe beam was the 633 nm line from a He-Ne laser; the pump beam was the same as used in the nonlinear transmission measurements. At the probe wavelength the absorption of Disperse Orange 3 is negligible. The birefringence was measured with a photoelastic modulator (PEM) and a birefringent wedge, in a similar way as reported in Ref. [11]. In the present measurements, however, instead of translating the wedge, the ac component of the PEM signal was displayed on an oscilloscope and the shift of the zero-crossing position was monitored [15]. This technique allowed us to follow the change of the birefringence with a time resolution of about 1 s. The temperature of the sample was stabilized at 28°C, with a precision of 0.1°C.

In order to investigate optical reorientation, one has to distinguish between different mechanisms contributing to the induced birefringence. As it will be explained in the next section in detail, this problem was solved using the setup depicted in Fig. 1. The relative phase shift between the extraordinary ($e$) and ordinary ($o$) rays was measured for two pump paths. One of the paths propagated nearly parallel to the probe direction, while in the other path propagated nearly perpendicular to it. The pump was switched from one path to the other using a twisted nematic cell, which rotated the polarization of the pump, and a Wollaston prism. For the nearly parallel path, a second twisted nematic was also used to rotate the pump polarization. In this way, for both paths, the pump was $p$-polarized. Care was taken that the two paths overlap within the liquid crystal sample. Furthermore the two pump intensities were kept equal using a neutral density filter. The pump diameter (2 mm) was much larger than the sample thickness (60 $\mu$m). The probe beam, which had an essentially smaller beam diameter than the pump, propagated through the sample at the center of the pump paths.
III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Fig. 2, the probe transmission is plotted as a function of the pump intensity. The data are normalized to the linear transmission, i.e., to the probe transmission without pump. The linear transmission coefficient $T_1$ was 3.8%.

The increase of the probe transmission with increasing pump intensity in Fig. 2 is attributed to the formation of cis isomers, which have lower absorption cross-section than the trans isomers. For a quantitative analysis, we took into account the attenuation of the pump intensity $I$ along the sample normal ($z$) direction described by [14]

$$\frac{dI}{dz} = -\alpha_T \left( 1 + \frac{\alpha_C - \alpha_T}{\alpha_T} X \right) I,$$  \hspace{1cm} (3.1)

where $\alpha_T$ and $\alpha_C$ are the trans and cis absorption coefficients for the given light propagation direction and polarization, and $X$ is the fraction of cis isomers. With the help of standard rate equations, taking into account both photoinduced and thermal trans-cis and cis-trans isomerizations, $X$ can be expressed as

$$X = X_S \frac{III_S}{1 + III_S},$$ \hspace{1cm} (3.2)

where $I_S$ is the saturation intensity, and $X_S$ is the saturation cis concentration of the dye, again for given light propagation direction and polarization. The transmission of the pump is determined by considering that it is attenuated in the same way as the probe. The transmission coefficient normalized to the linear transmission coefficient $M$ is given by the transcendental equation [14]

$$\ln M + (1/q - 1) \ln \frac{1 + qMT_1 I_{\text{in}}/I_S}{1 + qI_{\text{in}}/I_S} = 0$$

with $q = 1 + \frac{\alpha_C - \alpha_T}{\alpha_T} X_S.$

The line in Fig. 2 corresponds to the best fit of the data using Eq. (3.3), giving the parameters $I_S = 13 \text{ mW/cm}^2$ and $q = 0.68$.

The change of the probe birefringence can originate from several sources. Some sources are related to the rate of excitations per unit volume, like thermal effects or nonlinearities caused by generation of electric charges. Others may be related to a change in the order of the liquid crystal upon trans to cis isomerization. In these cases the induced birefringence does not include a change in the direction of the optical axis of the sample. Therefore the change in the shift between the e and o rays of the probe would be the same as when the pump polarization is reflected into a line parallel to the sample normal. On the other hand, reorientational nonlinearity does include a rotation of the optical axis via director reorientation. In this case, the change in the shift between the e and o rays of the probe are reversed when the pump polarization is reflected into a line parallel to the sample normal. Using the setup, shown in Fig. 1, the average of the optical phase shifts, measured at parallel and perpendicular pump-probe configurations gives the contribution of thermal and related mechanisms, while the difference of the birefringence in the two geometries is due to the reorientational nonlinearity.

In Fig. 3, the time evolution of the birefringence shift is shown for two different pump intensities. As it can be seen from the figure, the total phase shift is always negative. The change of birefringence upon switching from the parallel to the perpendicular path is, however, negative for the lower pump power and positive for the higher one. The average of the steady-state optical phase shifts as a function of the pump intensity is shown in Fig. 4. The shifts are linear with the input intensity, indicating that thermal nonlinearity probably gives the dominant contribution to this signal. Because this linearity is observed well above the saturation intensity for trans-cis isomerization where the fraction of cis isomers is relatively independent of intensity, it cannot be attributed to a decrease in order from the introduction of the cis isomers.

The difference of the phase shifts is plotted as a function of the pump intensity in Fig. 5. As it can be seen from this figure, the reorientational nonlinearity shows the expected qualitative behavior: It is negative at low intensities and becomes positive when the intensity is increased above a critical value. On the other hand, at very low intensities the experimental results appear to disagree with the model, which assumes that the reorientation originates purely from the torques induced by the trans and cis components. From the model, one would expect that near zero input intensity the torque is determined alone by the trans dopant factor, hence the difference in phase shift should increase linearly with pump intensity. The data, however, tend to converge to a constant negative value, at least to the lowest nonzero inten-
In order to make these considerations quantitative, we first tried to fit the data with the assumption that the reorientational phase shift originates entirely from the bulk trans and cis torques. The director distribution can be calculated from the balance of elastic and optical torque. As shown by Marrucci et al. [16], for nonisomerizable dyes the torque equation in the linear approximation can be written as

\[ K_1 \frac{d^2 \Theta}{dz^2} = -\frac{\zeta + n_e^2 - n_o^2}{2n_o^2} \sin 2\beta I(z), \]

where \( \zeta \) and \( \zeta_C \) are the trans and cis dopant factors, respectively. Inserting the above relation into Eq. (3.4) we obtain

\[ \frac{d^2 \Theta}{dz^2} = -p_1 \left(1 + \frac{I}{I_S}ight) I(z), \]

with

\[ p_1 = \frac{\zeta_T + n_e^2 - n_o^2}{2n_o^2 K_1} \sin 2\beta, \]

and

\[ \zeta = \zeta_T (1 - X) + \zeta_C X = \zeta_T + (\zeta_C - \zeta_T) X, \]

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and

\[ \zeta = \zeta_T (1 - X) + \zeta_C X = \zeta_T + (\zeta_C - \zeta_T) X, \]
The difference between the probe phase shifts in the parallel and perpendicular configurations in the linear approximation is \[ p_2 = \frac{\xi_C - \xi_T}{\xi_T + n_e^2 - n_o^2} X_S. \] (3.6c)

The measurements at very low intensities point to the existence of another mechanism of optical reorientation, correlated to the polarization direction, and other sources of optical nonlinearities. Extensions of this work to other azo dyes might give important hints about the physical process leading to the supranonlinear response.

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[4] In several papers instead of $\xi$ the enhancement factor is used, which gives the ratio of the dopant factor to the optical dielectric anisotropy.
[15] The details will be published in a separate paper.