

Chapter 1. Impact 5.1

Impact ...ON ASTROPHYSICS: I5.1 The spectroscopy of stars

The bulk of stellar material consists of neutral and ionized forms of hydrogen and helium atoms, with helium being the product of ‘hydrogen burning’ by nuclear fusion. However, nuclear fusion also makes heavier elements. The outer layers of stars are composed of lighter elements, such as H, He, C, N, O, and Ne in both neutral and ionized forms. Heavier elements, including neutral and ionized forms of Si, Mg, Ca, S, and Ar, are found closer to the stellar core. The core itself contains the heaviest elements and ^{56}Fe is particularly abundant because it is a very stable nuclide. All these elements are in the gas phase on account of the very high temperatures in stellar interiors. For example, the temperature is estimated to be 3.6 MK half way to the centre of the Sun.

Astronomers use spectroscopic techniques to determine the chemical composition of stars because each element, and indeed each isotope of an element, has a characteristic spectral signature that is transmitted through space by the star’s light. To understand the spectra of stars, we must first know why they shine. Nuclear reactions in the dense stellar interior generate radiation that travels to less dense outer layers. Absorption and re-emission of photons by the atoms and ions in the interior give rise to a quasi-continuum of radiation energy that is emitted into space by a thin layer of gas called the *photosphere*. To a good approximation, the distribution of energy emitted from a star’s photosphere resembles the Planck distribution for a very hot black body (Topic 4). For example, the energy distribution of our Sun’s photosphere may be modelled by a Planck distribution with an effective temperature of 5.8 kK. Superimposed on the black-body radiation continuum are sharp absorption and emission lines from neutral atoms and ions present in the photosphere. Analysis of stellar radiation with a spectrometer mounted on a telescope yields the chemical composition of the star’s photosphere by comparison with known spectra of the elements. The data can also reveal the presence of small molecules, such as CN, C_2 , TiO, and ZrO, in certain ‘cold’ stars, which are stars with relatively low effective temperatures.

The two outermost layers of a star are the *chromosphere*, a region just above the photosphere, and the *corona*, a region above the chromosphere that can be seen (with proper care) during eclipses. The photosphere, chromosphere, and corona comprise a star’s ‘atmosphere’. Our Sun’s chromosphere is much less dense than its photosphere and its temperature is much higher, rising to about 10 kK. The reasons for this increase in temperature are not fully understood. The temperature of the Sun’s corona is very high, rising to 1.5 MK, so black-body emission is strong from the X-ray to the radio-frequency region of the spectrum. The spectrum of the Sun’s corona is dominated by emission lines from electronically excited species, such as neutral atoms and a number of highly ionized species. The most intense emission lines in the visible range are from the Fe^{13+} ion at 530.3 nm, the Fe^{9+} ion at 637.4 nm, and the Ca^{4+} ion at 569.4 nm.

Because light from only the photosphere reaches our telescopes, the overall chemical composition of a star must be inferred from theoretical work on its interior and from spectral analysis of its atmosphere. Data on the Sun indicate that it is 92 per cent hydrogen and 7.8 per cent helium. The remaining 0.2 per cent is due to heavier elements, among which C, N, O, Ne, and Fe are the most abundant. More advanced analysis of spectra also permits the determination of other properties of stars, such as their relative speeds and their effective temperatures.

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