The value of density measurements in stellar coronae

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Abstract. The grating instruments on board Chandra and XMM-Newton now allow measurements of electron densities. These rely on the ratios of fluxes in emission lines, where one line depends on both collisional and radiative decay rates. The electron density is required to constrain the physical extent of the emitting region, and large samples of measurements are of interest in the context of trends in coronal activity. Here we discuss the important He-like ions and the differences in densities that result when different current databases are used.

REQUIREMENTS FOR MEASURING PLASMA DENSITIES

The spectrum emitted by an X-ray plasma reflects the physical conditions of the plasma, especially the plasma temperature and the plasma density. While different plasma temperatures affect an X-ray spectrum quite strongly (broad band continuum emission and appearance and disappearance of strong lines originating from ions in different ionization stages), the effects of different densities are rather subtle. This is demonstrated with Fig. 1, where two simulated spectra are shown. For simplicity we chose an isothermal plasma in one case with a high density and in the other with a low density. It can be seen that differences are only detectable in a few emission lines, and therefore density measurements in X-ray plasmas can only be carried out with high-resolution spectroscopy.

FIGURE 1. Simulations of spectra with low densities (left) and high densities.
DENSITY MEASUREMENTS WITH HE-LIKE TRIPLETS

The He-like ions provide a valuable method of measuring the electron density ($n_e$), in principle over a wide range of electron temperatures ($T_e$). The method [see 1] depends on the competition between collisions between the 1s2s$^3$S and 1s2p$^3$P levels and the radiative decay in the forbidden line (1s2s$^3$S – 1s$^2$1S). The ratio of the flux in the forbidden line to that in the intersystem (+magnetic quadrupole) line, then becomes sensitive to $n_e$, and can be parameterized as $f/i = R_0/(1 + n_e/N_c)$, where $R_0$ is the ratio in the low density limit and $N_c$ is the critical density. Both $R_0$ and $N_c$ contain atomic data relating to collisional and radiative rates. Fig. 1 shows simulated spectra for O VII at densities of $10^9$ cm$^{-3}$ and $10^{12}$ cm$^{-3}$, between which the ratio depends on $n_e$.

The Chandra LETGS measurements of Capella and YY Gem (Fig. 2) show clear differences in $f/i$ ratios, which indicate different densities in the two coronae.

The atomic rates have different dependences on $Z - 1$, where $Z$ is the nuclear charge, but should depend smoothly on $Z - 1$, for the ions of interest. Fig. 3 (left) shows the parameters $R_0$ and $N_c$ as a function of $Z - 1$. This brings out the differences between the data bases CHIANTI and APEC and shows log$N_c$ from [2]. Values of $R_0$ are indicated by different colours; this plot suggests that the data in $R_0$ for C V and N VI in CHIANTI need to be re-examined, and that those for Si XIII warrant closer examination. Note that log$N_c$ depends linearly on $Z - 1$.

The right hand panel of Fig. 3 shows the resulting variation of the ratio $f/i$ for O VII, indicating the importance of accurate atomic data when observed ratios are close to the low density limit. Measured densities will always be averages, but the He-like triplets formed at high temperatures probe only high densities (above $10^{12}$ cm$^{-3}$), while low-temperature ions measure only lower densities ($\sim 10^{10} - 10^{11}$ cm$^{-3}$); this leaves two cases unexplored: low densities in hot plasma and high densities in cool plasma.
WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM DENSITY MEASUREMENTS?

In stellar coronae the density measurements provide an important link between physical and geometrical properties, through the Emission Measure $EM = n_e^2 \times V$ ($n_e$: electron density and $V$: emitting volume). Densities are also needed to explore the optical depths of the lines: $\tau \propto \int n_e d\ell$, where $\ell$ is the path length (cm), and hence emitting areas.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

A survey of density measurements was carried out by [3]. Densities were measured from the He-like triplets (O VII and Ne IX) probing densities at temperatures $2 \times 10^6$ K and at $4 \times 10^6$ K. Measurements from higher-Z ions (Mg XI and Si XIII) result only in low-density limits $< 10^{12.5}$ cm$^{-3}$ (Fig.2 right). The observed range of f/i ratios shows that real differences in $n_e$ do occur between different coronae.

Accurate atomic data are essential in order to use these and other diagnostics of $n_e$, thus exploiting the excellent new spectra being obtained. Values of $n_e$ can then be used to constrain physical models of the atmosphere.

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