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Tuning of Conversion and Optical Emission by Electron Temperature in Inductively Coupled CO₂ Plasma

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on how the electron temperature and other plasma properties affect optical emission and CO₂ conversion in CO₂ plasma. Such plasma-mediated reactions can enable efficient CO₂ reuse. We study CO₂ and CO plasmas generated by inductively coupled radiofrequency power (30–300 W) at low pressures (6–400 Pa). By varying the argon admixture, we can study the effect of the electron temperature, T_e, on the conversion and emission properties using optical emission spectroscopy, mass spectrometry, and electrical probe measurements. Importantly, we can observe several parameters simultaneously: T_e, CO₂ conversion, chemiluminescence from CO₂, and dissociation products and optical emission from several atomic and CO transitions and from the C₂ Swan system. On the basis of these results, we establish a correlation between T_e, the CO₂ conversion, and the optical emission spectra. A low T_e enhances CO₂ conversion and Swan band emission. In contrast with published studies, our results show that the CO₂ and C₂ vibrations are not in local equilibrium. This means that the vibrational temperatures of CO₂ and C₂ should differ.

1. INTRODUCTION

CO₂ capture, storage, and utilization are key actions for mitigating climate change. Converting CO₂ into useful products can be done in different ways, including electrolysis, heterogeneous catalysis, thermolysis, and plasma reactions. But via any thermal route, CO₂ dissociation incurs a hefty thermodynamic penalty. Therefore, nonthermal processes, where energy is transferred to relevant degrees of freedom, such as vibrational excitation, are preferable. Of these, plasma conversion is becoming more and more attractive as the cost of renewable electricity decreases.

There are many ways for generating CO₂ plasma. Here, we focus on radiofrequency inductively coupled plasma (RF-ICP). This setup is relatively simple and scalable to high power. It also allows easy access to diagnostics and coupling with catalysts. There are few published examples using RF plasma for CO₂ conversion. Spencer and Gallimore studied CO₂ conversion in atmospheric RF Ar/CO₂ plasma. They found very high conversion of CO₂ but low energy efficiencies. This low efficiency is not intrinsic to RF plasma. The conversion of electrical power to plasma heating can be as high as 0.95. This suggests that there is room for improvement of the energy efficiency and that RF plasma can become a viable way to convert CO₂.

The direct thermal dissociation of CO₂ requires temperatures above 2400 K and typically yields a maximum energy efficiency of ca. 50%. Studies on plasma-mediated conversion showed higher energy efficiencies for CO₂ dissociation already in the 1970s. This is a promising route to CO₂ dissociation at low gas temperatures. This is because in a nonthermal plasma, the temperatures of various degrees of freedom may differ. These include the neutral gas temperature, the electron temperature (T_e), ion temperature, and temperatures corresponding to the rotational and vibrational degrees of freedom. This allows specific heating of the degrees of freedom that are relevant for CO₂ dissociation. An appropriately chosen plasma can excite relevant molecular vibrations (such as bending) more than translation and rotation.

There are two ways in which plasma can excite the molecular vibration of CO₂: (1) one-step electronic excitation
leading to electronically excited states, which subsequently decay. (2) Step-wise excitation through low-energy electrons exciting CO$_2$ molecules vibrationally but in the electronic ground state. The latter process is called “ladder climbing”. When two excited molecules collide, the more energetic one gets even more excited while the other falls back to its ground state.$^{5,17,18}$ Direct spectroscopic evidence for CO$_2$ ladder climbing is not available (it was observed for CO and N$_2$)$^{19}$, but simulations suggest its importance.$^{20}$ Recently, vibrationally excited CO$_2$ was observed in a plasma,$^{21}$ but its role in ladder climbing is still a moot point.

The excitation of specific vibrational modes can enhance the dissociation probability of a molecule on a (catalyst) surface. This was proven through laser heating of specific vibrational modes of CH$_4$. Recently, this work was extended to CO$_2$, which gets even more excited while the other falls back to its ground state. The excitation of specific vibrational modes can enhance the dissociation probability of a molecule on a (catalyst) surface. This was proven through laser heating of specific vibrational modes of CH$_4$. Recently, this work was extended to CO$_2$, which gets even more excited while the other falls back to its ground state. The excitation of specific vibrational modes can enhance the dissociation probability of a molecule on a (catalyst) surface. This was proven through laser heating of specific vibrational modes of CH$_4$. Recently, this work was extended to CO$_2$, which gets even more excited while the other falls back to its ground state.

The optical emission of plasma was monitored using an optical fiber cable placed at a downstream location of 1.5 cm from the coil (Figure 1) and viewing the center of the plasma. The data was transmitted to our UV–vis–near-infrared (NIR) spectrometers (spectrometer, StellarNet LSR-NIR3b, LSR-UV2, LSR-VIS4b, and LSR-VIS4). For comparing the optical emission spectroscopy (OES) from different channels, the intensity of spectra has been presented in a normalized unit, with counts per second, which is the same for all spectra. The wavelength observed in our experiment is at most 0.5 nm off the literature values. We attribute this to the limited accuracy on the wavelength scale of the spectrometers.

A differentially pumped quadrupole mass spectrometer (QMS, Hiden HPR20) was connected to the reactor for carbon dioxide conversion measurements. It was equipped with a variable leak valve to let the gases into the QMS. To evaluate the amount of different gases in the ICP reactor quantitatively, the data obtained from the QMS were carefully corrected following the calibration method given in refs 26, 28.

A double pin Langmuir probe (Double probe, Impedans Inc.) was used to measure the electron temperature ($T_e$) and the ion density ($n_i$) in the plasma. The distance between the Langmuir probe pins and the coil was 5 cm. The probe could not be moved during experiments. However, by visual inspection, we verified that the probe was in the center of the plasma on the upstream side. This probe is sensitive to the RF field in the plasma. Therefore, we ran measurements with the Langmuir double probe. These measurements do not give the whole electron energy distribution function but only $T_e$ and $n_i$. Analysis was done using the expressions of Rousseau et al., which is very similar to those of the earlier work by Chang and Laframboise.$^{29,30}$ The maximum pressure for which the analysis is claimed to be correct is more than 10 Torr, 1330 Pa. A Maxwellian electron energy distribution function is assumed, which is found reasonable by Singh and Graves.$^{31}$ We note that
the ion density measurement corresponds to some average density of the ions involved, i.e., of CO2+ and Ar+ or N2+ and Ar+. Thus, we cannot draw any firm conclusions from ni and do not show any measurements.

3. SPECTROSCOPY

Optical emission spectroscopy (OES) is a noninvasive measurement method and widely used in real-time monitoring of the plasma to identify the chemical components and various parameters (e.g., electron temperature, electron density, and gas pressure); see recent entries into the literature.25,32–34 Although the concentration of radiating species in the plasma is very low (4–6 orders lower than neutral gas density), several bands and lines have been identified in the spectral region from 450 to 855 nm. A CO or CO2 plasma shows a strong continuous spectral background, due to the chemiluminescence from the recombination of CO and O.35,36 In the process, CO2, B3Σg and 1Σg+ are formed. This broad frequency spectrum is hard to analyze. Rond et al. made a crude estimate of the absolute intensities, which discards the spectroscopic fine structure. Such and more detailed analysis are not required for the present work.37 The chemiluminescence spectrum is usually subtracted from the superimposed sharper spectral features.37 CO emits in the range of 450–855 nm through three bands: Angstrom, Asundi, and Triplet. In addition, we used lines of the CO third positive system at 283 nm. The characteristics of the bands used are listed in Table 1. It is important to note that the excitation energy of the upper states of these transitions requires 6–11 eV of energy, involving fairly hot electrons for excitation.38

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. CO and C2 Transitions Observed in This Study</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>molecular transitions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO Angstrom (b′ π ⃗ + → A′ π ⃗ )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third positive system (b′ π ⃗ + → a′ π ⃗ )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asundi (a′ π ⃗ + → a′ Σg+ )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triplet (d′Δ → Σg+ )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Swan band (d′Πg → a′Πg )</td>
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</table>

The C2 Swan band requires a much lower excitation energy, around 2 eV, and its emission can be expected in plasma with lower Te. However, the C2 molecule should be produced first before it can be electronically excited and radiate. The formation process in CO gas has been studied by Wallaart et al.39 At first C* atoms are generated in vibration-enhanced CO collisions

\[
\text{CO} \left( X^1 \Sigma^+, \nu_1 \right) + \text{CO} \left( X^1 \Sigma^+, \nu_2 \right) \\
\rightarrow \text{CO}_2 + \text{C}^* \left( E_v \geq E_{aa} \right)
\]

Here, the vibrational energy in the molecules E_v should exceed the activation energy for reaction E_{aa}. Subsequently, molecular C2 can be produced in two ways: direct recombination of carbon atoms with the help of a third body (M) or in reactions involving CO2, such as

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{C} + \text{C} + \text{M} & \rightarrow \text{C}_2^6 + \text{M}, \text{ or } 2\text{C} + \text{CO} + \text{M} \\
\rightarrow \text{C}_2\text{O} + \text{M} + \text{C} & \rightarrow \text{C}_2^6 + \text{CO} + \text{M}
\end{align*}
\]

The C2 formation probability will be proportional to the CO concentration by the power of 2 or more. Detailed modeling of the C2 emission spectrum is beyond the scope of the present paper. In fact, any complete modeling of C2 formation in a reactive plasma is not available to the knowledge of the authors.

Many groups studied carbon dioxide dissociation by OES.26,27,35,37 Strong optical emission of CO and C2 Swan band emission has been observed in CO2 plasma.26,27,35,40 The optical emission of the C2 Swan band was mainly generated by microwave plasma at near atmospheric pressure.26,27

Besides molecular emission, a number of atomic lines of O and C and additional atomic gases in the plasma, such as Ar, can be expected. This emission was observed in many studies, and we will discuss it only briefly here.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Electron Temperature. Figure 2a shows the dependence on power of Te for pure Ar or CO2 plasma. We notice that Te of CO2 plasma slightly decreases with increasing power. These trends agree with the results of Younus et al., Hopwood et al., and Godyak et al. for an ICP,41 as well as those of Nisha et al. and Vargheese et al.43 for different plasma. As the geometries and conditions of these experiments vary, we can only compare trends.

Figure 2b shows the dependence of Te on the Ar fraction Ar/(Ar + X) where X = N2 or CO2. The pressure was fixed at 20 or 150 Pa, whereas the power was kept at 300 W. The total flow was 200 or 1000 sccm, with Ar and N2 or CO2 flows determined by the mixing ratio. The value for pure Ar compares well with the 1.4 eV value seen by Godyak et al. for similar conditions.41 Especially in the case of dilute plasma (<10% CO2), Te depends strongly on the mixing ratio. At all conditions of flow and pressure, the dilute mixture shows a dramatic decrease in Te, with the lowest Te at the highest pressure. Godyak et al. see a similar decrease in Te for a pure Ar ICP plasma as a function of pressure, from 0.13 to 13 Pa.41

Figure 2c shows the dependence of Te on pressure for Ar, N2, and CO2 total flows of 100–200 sccm. Te shows a rapid increase with pressure with constant input power for pure N2 or CO2 flows. The increase in Te for CO2 is counterintuitive.

To confirm our measurement, we repeated these experiments with N2 instead of CO2, noting similar trends. The same trends were also reported by Younus et al. for N2–Ar plasma at lower pressures.43 Conversely, the Te for a pure Ar flow decreases with increasing pressure.

The most interesting result is shown in Figure 2d, which shows the emission of the CO product and the conversion of CO2 molecules as a function of pressure: the CO2 conversion and the CO emission are both anti-correlated to the electron temperature, Te (the maxima in Figure 2d occurs at the same position as the minima in Figure 2c).

4.2. Conversion Efficiency. Elsewhere, we studied energy and conversion efficiencies for pure CO2 and CO2–Ar plasma with high CO2 content.8 There, adding Ar to the plasma did increase the conversion efficiency and the energy efficiency. Here, we studied the conversion efficiency of more dilute mixtures. Figure 2b shows that for these dilute mixtures, Te can vary significantly.

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The conversion efficiency was calculated using eq 1

\[ \chi = \frac{m_{\text{CO}_\text{in}}}{m_{\text{CO}_\text{out}}} \]  

(1)

where \( m_{\text{CO}_\text{in}} \) and \( m_{\text{CO}_\text{out}} \) are the calibrated flow rates of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, respectively. Figure 3 shows the calculated conversion efficiencies (\( \chi \)) versus power. The dilute mixtures show high conversions at low \( T_e \) values (see Figures 2b and 3). The strong anti-correlation of \( T_e \) and \( \text{CO}_2 \) conversion is seen in Figure 2c,d respectively.

The energy efficiency for the conversion process is a typical figure of merit for plasma conversion. However, it is not very informative for a dilute plasma. For example, for the 300 W data at 1% dilution of \( \text{CO}_2 \) in Ar, the specific energy deposited per Ar atom is 4.6 eV. If we assume that \( \text{CO}_2 \) receives the same amount of energy, then the energy efficiency for full conversion of \( \text{CO}_2 \) is 2.9/4.6 \( \approx \) 60%. However, if we consider that all of the energy dissipated in the plasma is needed to convert this 1% of \( \text{CO}_2 \), the specific energy is 460 eV and the energy efficiency is below 1%. Such conditions are only of interest for scientific exploration.

4.3. Optical Emission Spectroscopy. Figure 4 shows the optical emission of \( \text{CO}_2 \)-Ar plasma in three different \( \text{CO}_2 \) flows (10, 20, and 100 sccm). The power, pressure, and flow rate of Ar were fixed at 300 W, 14 Pa, and 1000 sccm, respectively. The emission spectrum shows the emission from \( \text{C}_2 \) (Swan band), \( \text{CO} \) (Angstrom (An), Asundi (A) and Triplet bands (T)), \( \text{Ar} \) I (2p\( ^y \)-1s\( ^x \)) and O I multiplet (777 and 844 nm). When the \( \text{CO}_2 \) flow rate is set at 10 sccm, we see strong optical emission from \( \text{C}_2 \) Swan band system of the sequence (\( \Delta v = 0, \pm 1 \)); see ref 46. Transitions are labeled by \( \nu' - \nu'' \text{C}_2 \). Clear lines from \( \text{CO} \) bands have been labeled in a similar way. The transition frequencies were obtained from ref 37. Figure 4b,4d shows the oxygen I multiplet (777 and 844 nm) and the argon I atomic emission lines. These argon lines correspond to transitions from the 2p\( _x \) to 1s\( _x \) state.\(^{37}\) Clearly, the emission of \( \text{C}_2 \) Swan and \( \text{Ar} \) I lines decreases significantly by adding more \( \text{CO}_2 \). When the \( \text{CO}_2 \) flow rate is up to 20 sccm, we see a drastic reduction of the Swan band emission. At 100 sccm, the emission of the \( \text{C}_2 \) Swan band disappears. In all cases, the emission is superimposed on a broad \( \text{CO}_2 \) emission continuum that cannot be clearly resolved.\(^{37}\) The Swan band is visible only at the highest power and the highest dilutions (1–2%). Even for 10% \( \text{CO}_2 \) in Ar, we see only the \( \text{CO}_2 \) emission, superimposed on a \( \text{CO}_2 \) background.
A more pronounced change of the Swan band emission is seen when the power is changed. Although the conversion reaches a plateau at 150 W, the C2 Swan band emission still increases very significantly when the power is increased from 150 to 300 W, as seen in Figure S1 in the Supporting Information. Figure 4c shows the optical emission from 450 to 600 nm for three different power values (30, 150, and 300 W). Only at the highest power and the highest dilution the Swan band emission is dominant. For lower power or higher CO2 flow, it is barely visible. Figure S1 shows that the Swan band emission disappears for a high CO2 concentration or Te.

One remarkable feature (see Figure 4c) is the presence of very highly vibrationally excited CO molecules in the plasma. The 18−3 As line shows the presence of v = 18 CO in the plasma. Although a part of the vibrational excitation might be due to a shift in the excited state potential curves in the Franck−Condon region, an excitation of such high levels is rarely observed, as can be seen in the potential curves shown in Figure 11 of Rond et al.37 These authors also observed highly vibrationally excited CO2 in their RF torch. To study if the highly excited CO is formed in the CO2 dissociation process or is due to excitation of CO in the plasma, we ran experiments with CO instead of CO2 feeding the plasma.

Figure 5 compares the emission spectra from both CO and CO2 discharges diluted by Ar under similar conditions. For the same flow and dilution, the CO shows a stronger C2 Swan band emission. The CO2 background and the CO emission are comparable. However, the emission from O atoms is much stronger in the CO2 than in the CO plasma. This indicates that the O density is much higher in the CO2 plasma.

Figure 6 shows a series of spectra of undiluted CO and CO2 plasma at different pressures. The intensity of the CO2 emission background increases when the pressure decreases (the spectra are similar for the CO2 and the CO plasma).

Interestingly, the CO2 background, discussed in Section 5, is also visible in the spectra of the CO plasma. Clearly CO2 is formed in the CO plasma. This implies that also C atoms and derivatives must be formed in the CO plasma. Indeed, after long experimental runs, a slight blackening by C deposition of the system was observed for CO plasma operation, which was not observed earlier for CO2 plasma. In addition, the C2 Swan band is invisible in CO2 plasma and almost invisible in CO plasma. Only the 0−0 vibrational peak (516.4 nm) of the C2 Swan band is observable in pure CO plasma. The constituent C atoms must be formed by CO decomposition, as indicated in Section 5. The absence of a Swan band emission in the undiluted CO2 plasma at low pressure agrees with the data of Rond et al.37

Note that a CO emission of v = 19 is observed. Clearly, the CO is very strongly vibrationally heated in both the CO and CO2 plasma. This indicates that the vibrational excitation is due to excitation of CO in the plasma, for instance, by ladder climbing. The vibrational excitation is not primarily caused by the CO2 dissociation process.

The correlation between Te and conversion between Te and the nature of the optical emission spectra have already been demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4. In Figure 2c, we show the relation between T e and pressure. When CO2 flow and RF power were fixed at 100 sccm and 150 W, respectively, a minimum of T e ≈ 2.5 eV is seen. To examine if the CO2 conversion follows these small changes of T e with pressure, we have measured conversion as a function of pressure. The results are shown in Figure 2d. A clear anti-correlation with T e is seen. Figure 2d also shows the intensity of a distinct emission line as a function of pressure. This line is seen at 283 nm (the CO third positive system) and is chosen because it is well separated from the other lines (see Figure S2 in the Supporting Information). A maximum of CO production and CO emission is seen around the minimum of T e. Figure S2
shows that such a maximum is also seen for other CO emission lines, as well as for O multiplet-emission lines. The pressure dependence of emission and conversion are very similar. Crudely speaking, the emission intensity is proportional to the conversion times the line excitation probability. The similarity of the curves in Figure 2d shows that the variation of the line excitation probability is not very sensitive to $T_e$.

It is well-known that for Ar, metastable excited atoms are present in the plasma and play an important role, especially when $T_e$ is concerned. Excited states of Ar are observed in the spectroscopic data in Figures 4b,d, Sb and, S1b,d. The Ar I lines observed are all due to radiative decay of Ar 3p$^5$4p levels to 3p$^5$4s levels. Some of the lower levels are metastable and do not decay. The metastable density has been measured by Yang et al. and is higher than the Ar$^+$-ion density. In several studies on Ar containing ICP plasma, the ratio of the Ar I lines at 811.5 and 750.4 nm is studied. Czerwiec and Graves (CG) found for pure Ar a one-to-one correlation of this ratio and $T_e$. From our pure Ar measurement in Figure 4b (1000 sccm Ar 300 W), we obtained the ratio, $R = I(811.5)/I(750.5)$, as 1.8. The corresponding $T_e$ value from Figure 10 of the paper by CG is 1.0 eV. The $T_e$ seen in Figure 2c is about 1.7 eV. This difference is not so large considering the different experimental geometries, pressure, and power (53 Pa and 50 W for CG versus 14 Pa and 300 W for the present data). The Ar$–$CO$_2$ mixtures from our data cannot be compared to those of the CG data.

The Ar I spectroscopy demonstrates that Ar$^*$ is present in the plasma. As Ar$^*$ has a low ionization potential of about 4.1 eV, the metastables contribute strongly to sustain the Ar plasma by ionization by low-energy electrons. This ionization potential is much lower than that of ground-state Ar and CO$_2$. In fact, the metastable Ar acts like a K atom. Following the reasoning of van Rooij et al., it is the alkali-like ionization and the absence of dissociative neutralization as the ionization loss channel that increases the ionization lifetime for Ar$^+$ with respect to that of CO$_2$. These two properties cause the lowering of $T_e$ upon Ar addition to the plasma.

Reversibly, adding CO$_2$ to Ar plasma will increase $T_e$ due to removal of metastables; metastable Ar can be efficiently quenched by CO$_2$ molecules. Sadeghi et al. found a cross section for de-excitation of Ar$^*$ of more than 100 $\text{Å}^2$. This is clearly visible in Figure 4b, where the radiation at 750.5 nm, formed by excitation of Ar$^*$, has dropped more than a factor of 5 with the addition of 10% CO$_2$. This implies rapid destruction of Ar$^*$ by adding CO$_2$. Thus, a CO$_2$ admixture of a few percent will increase $T_e$ because of two reasons: (1) CO$_2$ quenches
Ar*; (2) CO$_2$* undergoes facile dissociative recombination requiring a higher $T_e$ to sustain the plasma.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Plasma Conditions. Figure 2b shows that at large Ar fraction, the $T_e$ decreases strongly. Adding 2% CO$_2$ to pure Ar increases $T_e$ by 3 eV at 150 Pa. This is caused by CO + O formation from dissociative recombination of CO$_2$* and $e^-$ occurs at a very high rate, much higher than recombination of Ar* and $e^-$, for which a third body is needed. In addition, metastable Ar is efficiently quenched by CO$_2$. Ar* has a very low ionization energy and facilitates sustaining the plasma with relatively cold electrons. As a consequence the overall ionization lifetime decreases and the ionization rate should increase to sustain the plasma. This increase drives $T_e$ up. A similar behavior is seen for N$_2$. At very low dilutions of Ar by CO$_2$, we therefore expect to see processes that are caused by low-energy electrons. The processes that require a high $T_e$ will be favored by pure CO$_2$ plasma or by plasma with a high CO$_2$ content. The biggest change in $T_e$ occurs during the addition of the first few percent of CO$_2$ to an Ar plasma. The low $T_e$ suggests that CO$_2$ dissociation is driven by ladder climbing involving electrons of energies from 0.5 to 4 eV.$^7$ Singh and Graves observed a small dip in their electron energy distribution function at about 2–3 eV, with a $T_e$ similar to that in the present work.$^{31}$

The effect of plasma power on pure Ar plasma is shown in Figure 2a. As the RF power is increasing, $T_e$ is slightly decreasing. At higher power, the electron–electron collision frequency increases, which will exhaust the electrons with the highest energy.$^{52}$ Similar results were obtained by Nisha et al. in RF plasma, who observed a drop in $T_e$ with increasing power.$^{54}$ Consequently, in high-power cases, we expect processes requiring a low $T_e$.

5.2. CO$_2$ Conversion. The conversion efficiencies in Figure 3 show a very strong correlation with the power and the CO$_2$–Ar ratio. The lowest ratio combined with the highest power gives the highest conversion. $T_e$ is anti-correlated with the Ar content of the plasma and with the power and strongly anti-correlated to the conversion, as shown in Figures 2c,d. The energy efficiency, hard to define here, as discussed, is getting worse with a more diluted plasma, and other methods should be used to decrease $T_e$ for a practical reactor. To make the reactor more efficient, we are considering a few options, such as the addition of a catalyst/catalytic reactor, suppression of recombination by shaping the plasma tube, and working with a thermal arc having a low $T_e$, e.g., see refs 6, 53.

5.3. Measurement of the CO Bands. CO emission from CO as source gas is easier to interpret than for CO$_2$ as source gas, because CO is added at room temperature. It is heated by electron impact and CO–CO collisions and cooled at the walls. Du et al. showed that the CO rotational temperature resulting from CO$_2$ dissociation is in equilibrium with the walls (at pressures significantly higher than ours) for a dielectric barrier discharge.$^{59}$ Due to limited resolution, we cannot measure the rotational bands. The vibrational bands show a different behavior. The strongest lines are ones from the Angstrom band starting from $v = 0$. These CO molecules have collided with the wall and are vibrationally cold. Subsequently, they are excited by hot plasma electrons into a radiative state. Just like in the case of rotation mentioned above, the vibrational quantum number will not change in the excitation and radiative de-excitation. Thus, the plasma contains significant amounts of vibrationally (and rotationally) cold CO. We also see a complex spectrum with lines corresponding to highly vibrationally excited molecules; in the Asundi band, we see molecules with $v = 19$. These molecules must be heated vibrationally inside the core of the plasma. Direct Franck–Condon excitation of these molecules by high-energy electrons is unlikely. Indeed, vibrational ladder climbing can lead to highly vibrationally excited CO when the molecules are heated by near-IR lasers up to $v < 7.$$^{19}$ We clearly observe CO molecules that are excited via a similar ladder climbing mechanism.

CO$_2$ plasma shows a lower emission intensity of CO, which has to be produced from CO$_2$ in the plasma (Figure 5a). The amount of CO OES from CO plasma is 2–3 times higher for an Ar-diluted CO plasma than for the Ar-diluted CO$_2$ one. The same is seen in Figure 6 for CO emission from pure CO and CO$_2$ plasma. The lower intensity for CO$_2$ plasma is reasonable, because the conversion of CO$_2$ to CO in the plasma is not 100% efficient. The spectra of CO generated in a CO$_2$ plasma also show lines from highly vibrationally excited states. Likewise, Angstrom band lines from $v = 0$ are seen. CO is heated in the core of the plasma, but it can still quench on the walls before re-excitation. This yields a large spread in vibrational excitation. There is no significant difference between the CO spectra taken at different pressures in pure CO$_2$ plasma (Figure 6b). The vibrationally highly excited molecules do decrease in intensity with increasing pressure. This may reflect a more efficient cooling by the CO at the walls or a decrease of $T_e$. Since the vibrationally excited molecules are seen both in CO$_2$ plasma and CO plasma, they must form by direct electron excitation of CO molecules.

In Figure 6a, a significant background of CO$_2^*$ chemiluminescence is seen. We see that significant amounts of CO$_2$ are made in the CO plasma. The emission intensity of the Angstrom band is increasing when increasing the pressure. However, the emission from Triplet and Asundi shows an opposite dependence on pressure. The upper electron state of Angstrom (10.78 eV) is much higher in excitation energy than that of the Triplet (6.92 eV) or Asundi (7.58 eV). This indicates that the decrease of relative intensity with pressure is due to a decreasing $T_e$ resulting in a relative decrease of high-energy electrons (>8 eV) compared with the relative increase of low-energy electrons (5–6 eV).$^{54,55}$

5.4. Measurement of C$_2$ Swan Band. We see a dramatic change in the spectra when the CO$_2$ flow becomes more diluted in Ar (see Figure 4a). At 100 sccm CO$_2$, we see mainly emission from CO, similar to that measured in pure CO$_2$ and CO in Figure 6. In these cases, we expect the same behavior, because the CO is directly excited by hot plasma electrons.$^{56}$ At severe dilution (range: 2–1%), the $T_e$ drops very quickly (Figure 2b). Therefore, the dominant optical emission is produced by processes that are driven by very low-energy electrons. These are the C$_2$ Swan bands, with an excitation energy of only 2 eV.

As indicated in Section 5, C$_2$ is formed by collisions between vibrationally excited CO molecules. Both IR radiation and low-energy electrons can vibrationally excite the CO by so-called ladder climbing and bring it into a state that allows it to be reactive with another excited CO molecule to form C. Further collisions of C result into the formation of C$_2$. Because the C$_2$ formation probability is at least quadratic versus the CO partial pressure, we expect more C$_2$ production from a pure CO
plasma than that from producing CO through CO₂ plasma. This larger C₂ production in CO plasma is shown in Figure 5a.

But still in a CO₂ plasma, C₂ can be formed efficiently. This is shown in Figure 4. Reducing Tₑ by increasing CO₂ dilution results in the increased formation of the C₂ molecule. The Tₑ can also be reduced slightly by increasing the power. This is shown in Figure 2a. Consequently, one expects an increase in the Swan band emission with power, as seen in Figure 4c. In plasma with much higher power and pressure, as seen in the work of Spencer and Gallimore and Bongers et al., also strong emission from the Swan bands is observed.²⁶,²⁷ We believe this is due to the fact that at high power and high pressure, the Tₑ is low and the CO bands cannot be excited. This in turn suggests that the CO₂ conversion should be high and that is indeed the case.

For highly diluted CO₂ and powers above 150 W, the conversion of CO₂ exceeds 90% for both the 1 and 2% mixtures. The conversion saturates; see Figure 3a. Also, the Swan band emission becomes prominent for these conditions. Nevertheless, the Swan band yield is not saturated as it is higher for the 1% mixture compared to that in the 2% case (see Figure 4a) whereas the CO concentrations are likely higher for the 2% dilution, so the increased yield of the Swan band emission for the 1% mixture must be due to a higher excitation probability, which is connected to the lower Tₑ. Also, the increase in Swan band emission with increasing power (Figure 4c) shows that emission does not saturate due to an increasing excitation probability.

C₂ is formed from CO, and that should be easier for pure CO than for CO₂ as feed gas. Given the saturation in CO production for a 1 or 2% diluted CO₂−Ar plasma shown in Figure 3, the C₂ yields should be similar for CO₂ and CO plasma. However, for the 10% CO₂−Ar data in Figure 5a, saturation in CO production with power has not yet been achieved (shown in Figure 3), which explains the higher Swan band emission for CO in Figure 5a. Besides the quadratically CO pressure dependence, another factor in the C₂ production is the destruction of C₂ by the O atoms. The O emission line is much stronger in CO₂ plasma (Figure 5b) at the same conditions. It indicates that there are more oxygen atoms in the CO₂ plasma than in the CO plasma. Thus, the destruction process is more prominent for CO₂ plasma than for CO plasma, yielding a lower emission from the C₂ Swan band.

6. CONCLUSIONS

We show that adding Ar to a CO₂ plasma can change the characteristics of the plasma dramatically. Measurements with a Langmuir double probe show that Tₑ changes very much as a function of the settings, notably the Ar/CO₂ ratio. We have found a strong anti-correlation of CO₂ conversion efficiency with Tₑ. A similar dependence of the OES with Tₑ was also observed. Low Tₑ (≈2 eV) leads to a significant Swan band emission, whereas higher Tₑ favors emission from the CO bands. Angstrom band emission is favored at the highest Tₑ. We observed a strong anti-correlation between Tₑ and the intensity of the optical emission spectroscopy of product CO lines, most dramatically shown in Figure 2d. A Tₑ as low as possible is required to obtain a high CO₂ conversion. This is a very important consideration but not the only one when designing future reactors and a benchmark for modeling of the processes involved.

We have not analyzed our results in terms of vibrational temperatures. However, we note that equilibrium between the C₂ vibrations and those of CO₂ is not obvious, given the complex production process of C₂ and the different behavior of Swan band emissions in CO and CO₂ plasma. We do observe ν = 19 in CO but not in C₂. This strongly suggests that Tₑ is not the same for CO and C₂ and presumably it will be different for CO₂ too. Thus, the C₂ Swan band emission occurs at the end of a long sequence of reactions and does not reflect the internal state of the CO₂ that is excited by the plasma, by ladder climbing or by hot electron impact. C₂ Swan band emission is an indicator of low Tₑ, where the plasma cannot electronically excite CO.

In summary, high CO₂ conversion requires a low Tₑ. Such a low Tₑ results in efficient Swan band emission. It is unlikely that the Tₑ measured for C₂ is the same as that for CO₂.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

Additional optical emission spectra (Figure S1); pressure dependence of several CO and O-atom emission lines (Figure S2) (PDF)

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