Role of contact electrification and electrostatic interactions in gecko adhesion

Hadi Izadi, Katherine M. E. Stewart and Alexander Penlidis

Department of Chemical Engineering, Institute for Polymer Research (IPR), University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1

Geckos, which are capable of walking on walls and hanging from ceilings with the help of micro-/nano-scale hierarchical fibrils (setae) on their toe pads, have become the main prototype in the design and fabrication of fibrillar dry adhesives. As the unique fibrillar feature of the toe pads of geckos allows them to develop an intimate contact with the substrate the animal is walking on or clinging to, it is expected that the toe setae exchange significant numbers of electric charges with the contacted substrate via the contact electrification (CE) phenomenon. Even so, the possibility of the occurrence of CE and the contribution of the resulting electrostatic interactions to the dry adhesion of geckos have been overlooked for several decades. In this study, by measuring the magnitude of the electric charges, together with the adhesion forces, that gecko foot pads develop in contact with different materials, we have clarified for the first time that CE does contribute effectively to gecko adhesion. More importantly, we have demonstrated that it is the CE-driven electrostatic interactions which dictate the strength of gecko adhesion, and not the van der Waals or capillary forces which are conventionally considered as the main source of gecko adhesion.

1. Introduction

When any two materials, similar or dissimilar, touch each other, electric charges transfer from one to the other, leading to the formation of a net negative charge on one substrate and a net positive one on the other [1–3]. Development of an electrical double layer (EDL) [4] at the contact interface via this contact electrification (CE) phenomenon [1,2] essentially gives rise to the formation of electrostatic interactions between the charged objects [5,6]. Despite the familiarity and importance, the contribution of CE-driven electrostatic interactions in gecko adhesion—which arises from the intimate contact of the fibrillar feature of the gecko toe pads with the substrate the animal is walking on or clinging to [7,8]—has always been overlooked [7–10]. In this study, we have estimated—for the first time—the amount of electric charges and, therefore, the magnitude of electrostatic forces that gecko foot pads develop upon contact. Experiments were conducted on two distinct substrates: on one such substrate geckos adhere strongly, while on the other they do not. Interestingly, simultaneous measurement of electric charges and adhesion forces revealed that CE-driven electrostatic interactions have a decisive contribution to the dry adhesion of geckos over these materials. Better insight into the role of CE-driven electrostatic interactions in gecko adhesion is not only very important for understanding the principles of the supreme adhesion of geckos [8,11], but also is fundamentally very crucial in the design and fabrication of synthetic fibrillar dry adhesives [12–14], which have been recently hypothesized to be largely affected by CE-generated electrostatic interactions [15–17].

2. Results and discussion

In order to determine the occurrence of CE and the extent of the electrostatic interactions arising from it in gecko adhesion, the magnitude of electric...
mirror-finished copper sheet. When an electrically neutral developed right after contact occurred—was estimated by adhesion tests, the magnitude of the electric charges—
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The increase of the shear strength throughout the dragging step is a feature of the toe pads and the substrate gave rise to the formation of an EDL at the contact interface. Separation of electric charges at the contact zone induced an image charge, with the density of \( \sigma_{\text{image}} \) in the backing copper sheet. Knowing the magnitude of \( \sigma_{\text{image}} \) from the readings of the electrometer connected to the back of the copper sheet, the surface charge density over the polymer (\( \sigma_s \)), which can practically be considered equal to that on the foot pad [5,6], was determined (see the electronic supplementary material for more details). Charge estimation results revealed that, during almost all contacts, the gecko foot pad became positively charged while the polymer was negatively charged. The absolute values of the surface charge densities immediately after intimate contact with Teflon AF and PDMS were 1.6 \( \pm \) 0.2 mC m\(^{-2} \) (\( n = 10 \)) and 1.3 \( \pm \) 0.1 mC m\(^{-2} \) (\( n = 10 \)), respectively (figure 2d). In principle, these charge densities (equivalent to approx. 1 elementary charge per 89–134 nm\(^2 \)) are relatively large [2,15], albeit typical for an intimate contact [5,6].

According to the charge estimation results and considering the toe pad–substrate interface as that between two parallel plates, the electrostatic adhesion strengths that gecko foot pads develop with Teflon AF and PDMS—in the normal direction before sliding—are 4.7 \( \pm \) 1.2 N cm\(^{-2} \) and 2.4 \( \pm \) 0.4 N cm\(^{-2} \), respectively (see the electronic supplementary material for more details). Interestingly, as illustrated in figure 3, the estimated adhesion strengths are of the same magnitude and also, more or less, of the same proportion (almost, on average, twice larger) as the static lateral shear strengths that were experimentally measured for these substrates.
Although direct charge measurements clearly demonstrate that the contribution of CE-driven electrostatic interactions in gecko adhesion is dominant, it should be noted that, along with electrostatic forces, van der Waals (vdW) and capillary forces could also contribute to the measured adhesion forces [7,9,24]; vdW interactions naturally exist between two materials in contact [25], whereas capillary interactions become effective in humid conditions [24,25]. Concerning the latter, however, as all the experiments were carried out at the constant relative humidity of 50 ± 4% (temperature, $T = 24 ± 1^\circ$ C), and as both substrates share an almost similar hydrophobicity (Teflon AF, $\theta = 108.4 ± 0.6^\circ$, $n = 6$; PDMS, $\theta = 106.0 ± 0.7^\circ$, $n = 6$), the contribution of capillary interactions in the overall interfacial interactions for both polymers should be essentially identical—while capillary interactions for PDMS could be even slightly more effective [24,26].

With respect to vdW forces, on the other hand, Teflon AF is also expected to generate somewhat smaller vdW forces in comparison with PDMS. In particular, both polymers share a comparable sub-nanometric roughness (Teflon AF, RMS roughness $= 0.2 ± 0.2$ nm, $n = 3$; PDMS, RMS roughness $= 0.6 ± 0.2$ nm, $n = 3$), and therefore have similar geometry of contact with the gecko foot pad [9,27,28]. Hence, Teflon AF (with a Hamaker constant of $5.1 \times 10^{-20}$ J) should develop almost 0.8 times smaller vdW forces than PDMS, which has a Hamaker constant of $6.5 \times 10^{-20}$ J (see the electronic supplementary material for more details). With Teflon AF having a weaker ability than PDMS to generate both vdW and capillary forces, development of the observed enhanced adhesion forces by Teflon AF (figures 1d and 3) again confirms the decisive contribution of CE-driven electrostatic interactions in gecko adhesion.

As illustrated, what makes the difference between geckos sticking strongly to one substrate and not to the other is the extent of the contribution of CE-driven electrostatic interactions for each substrate. Even so, during the last 80 years of research on gecko adhesion, the role of electrostatic interactions in gecko adhesion was always passed over [7–10] by referring to the experiments conducted by Dellit [29], in which adhesion of a gecko (12 g $Tarentola mauritanica$) was tested against a vertically aligned chromed metal surface. After bombardment with ionized air, supposedly eliminating electrostatic interactions, and observing that the adhesion between the gecko and the metal surface did not change, Dellit concluded that the electrostatic interactions did not...
contribute to the adhesion of geckos [29]. The control sample used by Dellit was small pieces of paper that were brought to adhere to a glass rod, which was charged by rubbing in advance [29]. In regard to Dellit’s experiments, it should be noted that air ionization can only be employed to eliminate electrostatic interactions from non-tight contacts but not those from intimate contacts—like the CE-driven electrostatic interactions of gecko foot pads. Put otherwise, during ionization of air by radioactive materials or X-ray radiation, as employed by Dellit [29], elementary air ions (typically approx. 0.4 nm in size), within a fraction of a second after their creation, attract 8–15 (mostly water) molecules to themselves and form positive and negative molecular clusters, known as ‘air ions’ [30]. As a matter of fact, owing to their relatively massive size, air ions can only be employed to eliminate electric charges from an electrostatic contact—like that of the paper–glass with typical micro-scale roughness—where air ions can reach the contact interface to dissipate surface charges. In the intimate contact of seta-substrate, with an atomic separation distance of approximately 0.3 nm [7,21], however, eliminating CE-generated electrostatic forces by air ionization is not physically practical, simply because air ions cannot penetrate between the contact interface in order to dissipate surface charges.

References