



# $^1\text{H}$ DOSY analysis of high molecular weight acrylamide-based copolymer electrolytes using an inverse-geometry diffusion probe

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Received: 19 October 2022 / Revised: 23 December 2022 / Accepted: 30 December 2022 / Published online: 2 February 2023  
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## Abstract

Copolymers of [2-(acryloyloxy)ethyl]trimethylammonium chloride (AETAC) and acrylamide (AAM) (AETAC-*co*-AAM) are polyelectrolytes used as flocculants in wastewater purification. Diffusion-ordered two-dimensional NMR spectroscopy (DOSY) experiments for AETAC-*co*-AAM samples with  $M_w$  ranging from 1.9 to 3.9 million and a polyacrylamide sample with  $M_w$  of 1.3 million were carried out in pure  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  and in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  containing 0.1 or 1 M NaCl using an inverse-geometry diffusion probe system. Projections of the DOSY contour plots onto the diffusion coefficient ( $D$ ) dimension gave distributions of  $D$  for the AETAC and AAM units in the samples. The  $D$  values at the maximum point of the distribution ( $D_p$ ) agreed fairly well with those determined by dynamic light scattering.

## Introduction

Copolymers of [2-(acryloyloxy)ethyl]trimethylammonium chloride (AETAC) and acrylamide (AAM) (AETAC-*co*-AAM) (Fig. 1) are important in various industries. For example, they are used as flocculants in paper manufacturing [1, 2], for the enrichment and recovery of minerals from mining [3], and in wastewater treatment [4–6]. Because it comprises polyelectrolytes, AETAC-*co*-AAM provides better flocculation than nonionic polyacrylamide (PAAM) [7–10]. In recent years, more than two kinds of acrylamide-based polymer flocculants have been used because sludge dewatering has become difficult owing to increasing organic matter content in wastewater [11–13].

The properties of AETAC-*co*-AAM in aqueous media have been studied by light scattering and viscometry [4]. The relationships between the weight average molecular weight ( $M_w$ ), root mean square radius of gyration ( $R_g$  in nm)

and intrinsic viscosity ( $[\eta]$  in dL/g) were determined for AETAC-*co*-AAM with 30% AETAC:  $R_g = 0.033 M_w^{0.54}$ ,  $[\eta] = 1.05 \times 10^{-4} M_w^{0.73}$  (1 M NaCl 25 °C,  $4.5 \times 10^5 \leq M_w \leq 2.7 \times 10^6$ ). The effect of ionic strength on  $[\eta]$  was also investigated for NaCl concentrations ( $C_s$ ) between  $10^{-2}$  and 1 mol/L, with a semirigid configuration of the copolymer chains at low  $C_s$  values being suggested owing to the absence of a linear relationship between  $[\eta]$  and  $C_s^{-1/2}$  [4]. The interaction between AETAC-*co*-AAM and an anionic perfluorinated surfactant was studied by NMR spectroscopy to elucidate the mechanism of flocculation [6]. Full spectral assignment of  $^1\text{H}$  and  $^{13}\text{C}$  resonances was achieved with 1D and 2D experiments. The  $^1\text{H}$  NMR spectra of AETAC-*co*-AAM with 14% and 23% AETAC in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  (1% w/v) showed a higher multiplicity than the corresponding spectra of AETAC-*co*-AAM with 42% and 54% AETAC, and a stiff rod-like structure of the copolymer chains at higher AETAC compositions was suggested. This interpretation was consistent with the  $^{13}\text{C}$  NMR spectra of AETAC-*co*-AAM, in which the number of resonances with higher AETAC compositions was smaller than that with lower AETAC compositions [6].

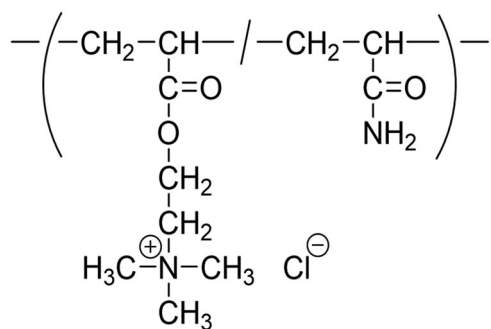
The aim of the present study was to contribute to the characterization of AETAC-*co*-AAM in aqueous media by applying diffusion-ordered two-dimensional NMR spectroscopy (DOSY). DOSY is an NMR method [14–17] that reports diffusion coefficients ( $D$ ) for individual resonances in NMR spectra. DOSY and the related pulsed field gradient (PFG) NMR diffusometry have been used to determine the

**Supplementary information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41428-023-00758-9>.

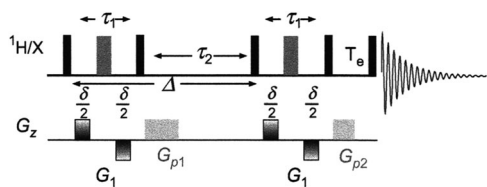
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**Fig. 1** The chemical structure of AETAC-*co*-AAm



**Fig. 2** The *bpp-ste-led* pulse sequence [45]. The encoding gradients of a stimulated echo (*ste*) sequence were applied as symmetrical bipolar pulse pairs (*bpp*) of the total duration,  $\delta$ . The longitudinal eddy-current delay (*led*) sequence was extended with a delay period,  $T_e$

$M_w$  and molecular weight distribution of synthetic polymers [15, 18–34] and to characterize mixtures of polymers [35–37] and block copolymers [33, 38–43]. A useful tutorial on DOSY experiments for polymers was recently published [44]. Nevertheless, high-molecular-weight AETAC-*co*-AAm in aqueous media is challenging to characterize using DOSY experiments because their  $D$  values are as small as  $10^{-11.5}$  m<sup>2</sup>/s or less and their <sup>1</sup>H resonances suffer from line broadening owing to restricted segmental mobility of the polyelectrolyte chains.

One of the most commonly used pulse sequences for DOSY experiments is the bipolar pulse pair stimulated echo sequence with a longitudinal eddy current delay (*bpp-ste-led*) (Fig. 2) [45]. The observed echo intensity  $f(G)$  at a given PFG strength  $G$  (in G/cm) is given by the Stejskal–Tanner expression:

$$f(G) = f(G_1) \exp\left(-\frac{2\tau_1}{T_2} - \frac{\tau_2}{T_1}\right) \exp\left[-(\gamma\delta G)^2 D \left(\Delta - \frac{\delta}{3}\right)\right], \quad (1)$$

where  $G_1$  represents the first (the smallest) value of the gradient ramp steps;  $\tau_1$ ,  $\tau_2$ ,  $\delta$ , and  $\Delta$  are delays, which are shown in Fig. 2;  $\gamma$  is the magnetogyric ratio of the observed nuclide; and  $T_1$  and  $T_2$  are the longitudinal and transverse relaxation times, respectively. Modern NMR spectrometers are generally equipped with a PFG system (probe and amplifier) generating a maximum  $G$  of several tens to 60 G/cm and a maximum  $\delta$  of several milliseconds. To obtain 5% echo attenuation  $f(G)/f(G_1)$ , which is required for reliable

DOSY experiments, a delay,  $\Delta$ , of approximately 460 ms (Eq. 1) is required to determine a  $D$  of  $10^{-11}$  m<sup>2</sup>/s under the following experimental parameters: a maximum  $G$  of 60 G/cm and a  $\delta$  of 5 ms. A larger  $\Delta$  is necessary as  $D$  decreases and as  $M_w$  of the solute polymer increases because the relationship between  $D$  and  $M_w$  roughly obeys  $D \propto M_w^{-0.6}$ . Applying a large  $\Delta$  for DOSY experiments of AETAC-*co*-AAm severely reduces the  $f(G)$  intensity because  $T_2$  of the copolymer resonances is expected to be less than several tens of milliseconds (see Eq. 1 and Supplemental Material) owing to low segmental mobility, as described above. In our previous studies [37, 46], DOSY experiments of AETAC-*co*-AAm with  $M_w$  ranging from  $5.1 \times 10^6$  to  $1.5 \times 10^7$  were carried out using a diffusion probe system with a maximum  $G$  of 1200 G/cm. The  $D$  values determined by DOSY agreed with those determined by dynamic light scattering (DLS). However, the DOSY experiments gave broad distributions of  $D$  owing to the low signal-to-noise ratio (S/N) and poor resolution of the spectra. Recently, an inverse-geometry diffusion probe system (with a maximum  $G$  of 1800 G/cm) optimized to perform <sup>1</sup>H NMR diffusometry was devised. In contrast to conventional (normal geometry) diffusion probes, which are useful for NMR diffusometry of low  $\gamma$  nuclei, the inverse-geometry diffusion probe is optimized for <sup>1</sup>H DOSY experiments of high molecular weight polymers. For example, Lopez and coworkers reported <sup>1</sup>H NMR diffusometry experiments for polystyrene sulfonates with  $M_w$  up to  $3.4 \times 10^5$  in D<sub>2</sub>O using this inverse-geometry diffusion probe [47]. The  $M_w$  values of AETAC-*co*-AAm investigated in our present study are larger than those of polystyrene sulfonates by one order of magnitude. This inverse-geometry diffusion probe enabled us to obtain <sup>1</sup>H DOSY spectra with greater resolution than those obtained in our previous studies.

## Experimental procedure

### Materials

AETAC was purchased from MT Aquapolymer Inc. (Tokyo). AAm and 2,2'-azobis(2-amidinopropane) dihydrochloride (V-50) were purchased from Sigma–Aldrich.

### Preparation of polyacrylamide and AETAC-AAm copolymers

Radical polymerization was performed in water at 40 °C for 15 h with V-50 as the initiator. Polyacrylamide (sample A) and AETAC-*co*-AAm (samples B, C, D) with different monomer compositions and molecular weights were synthesized by changing the concentration of V-50 from 0.01 to 1.06 mol% in the monomer mixture. The reactions were

stopped by cooling, and the polymers were isolated by repeated precipitation in acetone. Polyacrylamide and AETAC-*co*-AAm powders were obtained by vacuum drying at room temperature.

### NMR measurements

The polyacrylamide and AETAC-*co*-AAm powders were dissolved in D<sub>2</sub>O (99.9 atom% D), 0.1 M NaCl in D<sub>2</sub>O or 1 M NaCl in D<sub>2</sub>O containing 0.05% trimethylsilylpropanoic acid to prepare samples of 0.2 wt% polymer or copolymer. The powders of sample A (or C) and sample D were mixed, and then the solvent was added. These sample solutions were transferred to a sample tube with a 5-mm outer diameter, and the liquid height was adjusted to 30 mm. DOSY measurements were performed using a Bruker AVANCE NEO 400 spectrometer equipped with the Diff BBI probe and the Diff-5-3 program implemented in TopSpin 4.1.0 software. For the measurements of the polymer samples in D<sub>2</sub>O containing 1 M NaCl at 30 °C, data were acquired using the *bpp-ste-led* sequence [45] (PULPROG: diffSteBp) with a gradient pulse length ( $\delta$ ) of 3.2 ms (gradient pulse shape: *smsq*), a diffusion delay ( $\Delta$ ) of 10 ms, an eddy current delay ( $T_e$ ) of 5 ms, and a gradient recovery delay ( $t_g$ ) of 0.5  $\mu$ s. The parameters for the measurements under other conditions are given in the figure legends. All experiments were recorded using 128 scans for each gradient strength in 128 linear  $G$  lamp steps. The acquisition time was 0.84 s with a relaxation delay of 4.16 s using 8192 data points for the  $F_2$  dimension covering 4850 Hz. The transmitter frequency offset was adjusted to the frequency of the  $N(CH_3)_3^+$  resonance. An exponential window with a broadening factor of 3 Hz was applied prior to Fourier transform along the  $F_2$  dimension. Careful phase adjustment and baseline correction were performed. The CONTIN method [48, 49] implemented in the TopSpin 4.1.4 software was adopted for inversion of the Laplace transform along the  $F_1$  dimension.

### SEC-MALS measurements

Size exclusion chromatography coupled with multiangle light scattering (SEC-MALS) measurements were performed in 1 M NaCl at 25 °C to determine the  $M_w$ ,  $M_w/M_n$ , and root mean square radius of gyration ( $R_g$ ) of the polyacrylamide and AETAC-*co*-AAm samples. The powders of these samples were dissolved in 1 M NaCl to give 0.2 wt% solutions. An MALS detector (WYATT DAWN HELEOS-II) and two SEC columns (Shodex OHpak SB-806 M HQ with a maximum porosity of 2 million and OHpak SB-807 HQ with a maximum porosity of 50 million) were used for the analysis. Aqueous NaCl (1 M) was used as the eluent, and the flow rate was 0.6 mL/min. A Wyatt Optilab T-rEx

differential refractometer was calibrated using a series of 1 M NaCl solutions of known concentrations [50].

### Dynamic light scattering measurements

DLS measurements of the polymer samples were carried out for 0.2 wt% solutions in 1 M NaCl at 30 °C using a Malvern Panalytical Zetasizer Nano ZSP system and a 10-mm polystyrene cell. The powders of polyacrylamide and AETAC-*co*-AAm were dissolved in 1 M NaCl to prepare samples of 0.2 wt% polymer or copolymer. The powders of sample A and sample D were mixed, and then the solvent was added. Inversion of the Laplace transform was conducted using the CONTIN method implemented in Zetasizer software (version 8.02).

### Intrinsic viscosity measurements

The  $[\eta]$  of the polymers was measured in 1 M NaCl at 25 °C using a Cannon-Fenske viscometer (size 75). The intrinsic viscosity values were extrapolated from the linear plots of the reduced specific viscosity as a function of concentration [50].

## Results and discussion

Table 1 summarizes the average AETAC composition,  $M_w$ ,  $M_w/M_n$ ,  $R_g$ , and  $[\eta]$  of samples A to D. It should be noted that the  $[\eta]$  values increased with increasing  $M_w$ . According to the work of Mabire et al., in a 1 M NaCl solution,  $[\eta]$  is affected by the ionic strength of the solution as well as the composition and  $M_w$  of the polymer,

**Table 1** Homopolymer of AAm and copolymers of AETAC and AAm prepared by radical polymerization at 40 °C<sup>a</sup>

Sample	AETAC (mol%)		$M_w^c/10^6$	$M_w/M_n^c$	$R_g^c$ (nm)	$[\eta]^d$ (dL/g)
	Feed <sup>a</sup>	Copolymer <sup>b</sup>				
A	0	0	1.3	1.6	61	5.4
B	60	59.3	2.1	2.8	87	7.7
C	60	59.4	1.9	2.6	86	7.5
D	80	80.9	3.9	3.1	109	10.1

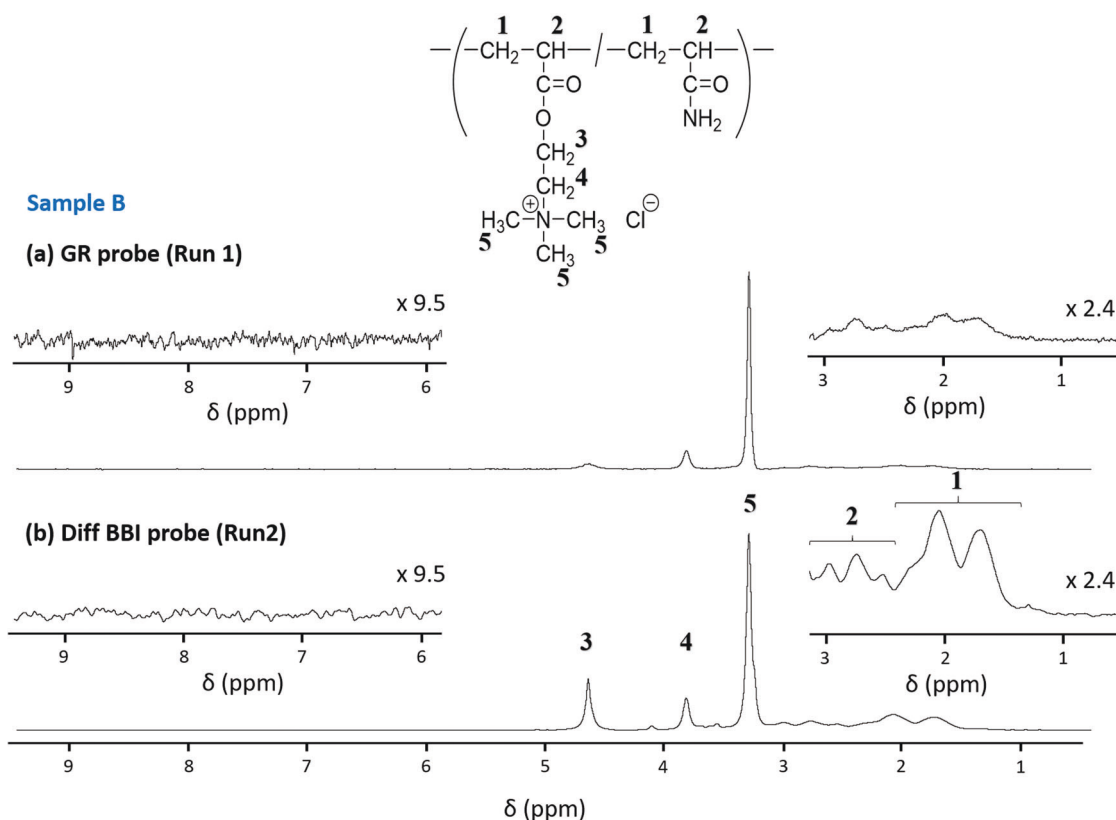
<sup>a</sup>V-50 was used as the initiator (0.01–1.06 mol% of monomer). The monomer concentration in water was 4.6 mol/L

<sup>b</sup>Determined by <sup>1</sup>H NMR in 1 M NaCl in D<sub>2</sub>O at 40 °C using the following Eq.:

$$\text{AETAC (mol\%)} = \text{Intensity (N(CH}_3)_3/9) / \text{Intensity ((CH+CH}_2/3))$$

<sup>c</sup>Weight average molecular weight ( $M_w$ ) and root mean square radius of gyration ( $R_g$ ) determined by SEC-MALS measurements in 1 M NaCl at 25 °C

<sup>d</sup>Determined in 1 M NaCl at 25 °C



**Fig. 3** 1D NMR spectra extracted from the DOSY data of sample B in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  at  $40^\circ\text{C}$ . The spectra were acquired at the first gradient step,  $G_1$ . The DOSY experiments were performed using the GR probe (previous study, Run 1) (a) and the Diff BBI probe (present study, Run 2) (b). See Table 2 for the parameters of these experiments

and  $R_g$  is affected by  $M_w$  but not by the composition of AETAC-*co*-AAM [4].

Figure 3b shows the 1D NMR spectrum extracted from the DOSY data of sample B measured in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  at  $40^\circ\text{C}$ . The spectrum was acquired at the first gradient step,  $G_1$ . The parameters for the DOSY experiment are shown in Table 2 as Run 2. According to the assignments by Proietti et al. [6], the broad resonances at 1.35–2.41 and 2.41–3.04 ppm can be assigned to the  $\text{CH}_2$  (1) and  $\text{CH}$  (2) groups of the copolymer main chain, respectively. We assigned the strong resonance at 3.24 ppm to the  $(\text{CH}_3)_3\text{N}^+$  group (5) and the resonances at 3.77 and 4.59 ppm to the  $\text{CH}_2$  groups of the AETAC side chain (3, 4). A comparison of this spectrum with that of Fig. 3a in our previous study [37, 46] (the parameters are shown in Table 2 as Run 1) reveals that the intensities of resonances 1–4 were higher than that of resonance 5. We mainly attribute this increase to the reduction of the diffusion time ( $\Delta$ ) from 100 ms (Run 1) to 10 ms (Run 2), which was made possible by the use of the Diff BBI probe. The  $T_2$  values for resonances 1–4 were smaller than that of resonance 5 (see Supplementary Material). Thus, using a large  $\Delta$  leads to severe loss of the echo intensity for small  $T_2$  resonances (see Eq. 1).

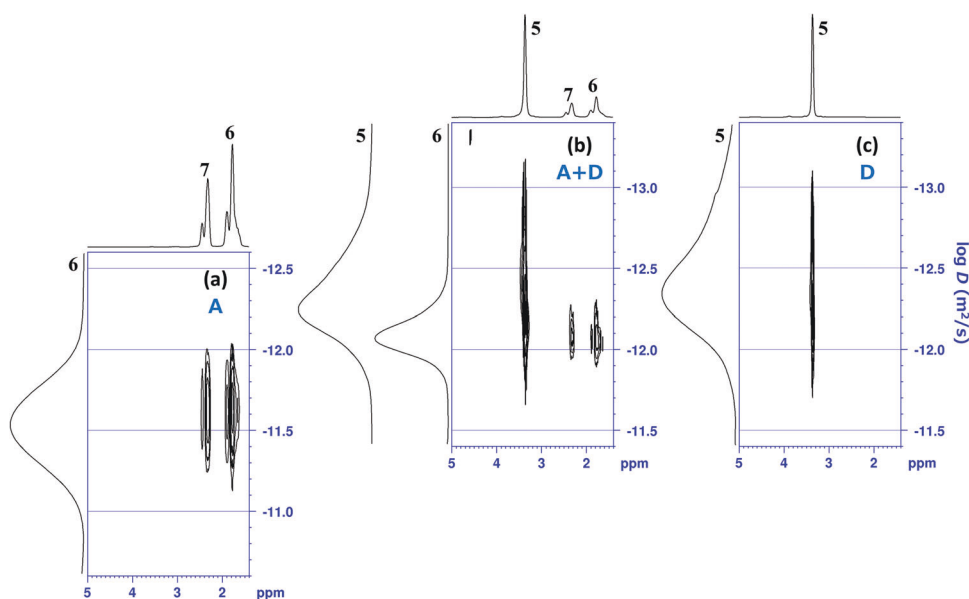
**Table 2** Parameters for the DOSY experiments of AETAC-*co*-AAM (sample B) used in our previous studies (Run 1) [37, 46] and in the present study (Run 2)<sup>a</sup>

Run	1	2
Spectrometer	JEOL JNM-ECA	Bruker Avance NEO
Probe	5 mm GR	5 mm Diff BBI
Observed frequency (MHz)	500	400
$\Delta$ (ms)	100	10
$\delta$ (ms)	2.0	2.5
$t_g$ ( $\mu\text{s}$ )	238	0.5
$T_c$ (ms)	50	5
$n$	32	128
Number of $G$ steps	32	64
Shape of the gradient pulse	square	smooth square
$G_1$ (G/cm)	100	80
$G_{\text{max}}$ (G/cm)	1100	1720
S/N of the $(\text{CH}_3)_3\text{N}^+$ resonance <sup>b</sup>	263.7	861.5
S/N of the $\text{CH}_2$ resonance <sup>b</sup>	9.9	47.0

<sup>a</sup>DOSY experiments in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  at  $40^\circ\text{C}$ .  $t_g$  denotes the gradient recovery time (see Fig. 1 for the other abbreviations of the delay times ( $\Delta$ ,  $\delta$ ,  $T_c$ ));  $n$  is the number of gradient steps (linear  $G$  ramp); and  $G_1$  and  $G_{\text{max}}$  are the strengths of the minimum (the first) and maximum (the  $n$ -th) gradients, respectively

<sup>b</sup>Signal-to-noise ratio for the 1D spectrum obtained at  $G_1$ . An exponential apodization function ( $\text{LB} = 3.0$  Hz) was applied prior to the Fourier transform along the  $F_2$  dimension. The noise region for the S/N calculations was 6.5–10.0 ppm

**Fig. 4** DOSY-CONTIN contour plots with  $F_1$  (the  $D$  dimension) and  $F_2$  (the chemical shift dimension) projections of sample A (a), sample D (c), and a 1:1 mixture of samples A and D (b). The DOSY experiments were performed in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  at  $40^\circ\text{C}$ . Sample concentration = 0.2 wt %;  $\Delta = 12$  ms;  $\delta = 5.4$  ms; number of linear  $G$  steps = 64 (a) or 128 (b, c);  $G_{64} = 700$  G/cm (a); and  $G_{128} = 1400$  and  $1420$  G/cm in (b) and (c), respectively



**Fig. 5** DOSY-CONTIN contour plots with  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  projections of sample A (a), sample D (c), and a 1:1 mixture of samples A and D (b). The DOSY experiments were performed in 1 M NaCl in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  at  $30^\circ\text{C}$ . Sample concentration = 0.2 wt%;  $\Delta = 10$  ms;  $\delta = 3.4$  ms; number of linear  $G$  steps = 128; and  $G_{128} = 1100$ ,  $1400$ , and  $1650$  G/cm in (a–c), respectively

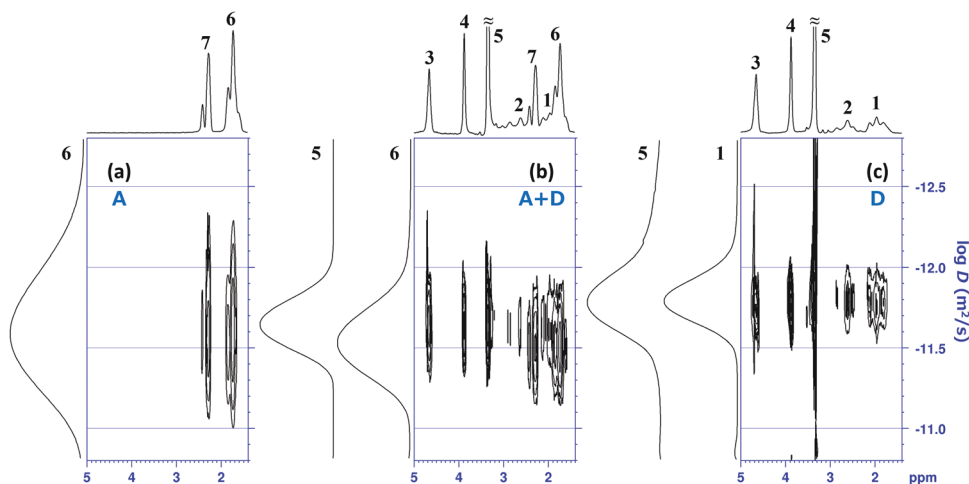


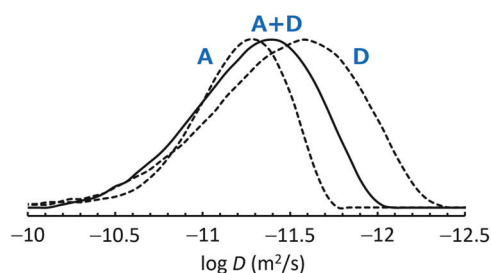
Figure 4 shows the DOSY contour plots with  $F_1$  (the  $D$  dimension) and  $F_2$  (the chemical shift dimension) projections obtained from the CONTIN analysis of samples A and D and a 1:1 mixture of A and D in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  at  $40^\circ\text{C}$ . The plots for sample A (Fig. 4a) show the resonances due to the  $\text{CH}_2$  (6) and  $\text{CH}$  (7) groups of the polyacrylamide main chain and the log-Gaussian distribution of  $D$  with the peak maximum ( $D_p$ ) at a  $\log D$  of  $-11.52$   $\text{m}^2/\text{s}$ . In contrast, almost no resonances other than that due to the  $(\text{CH}_3)_3\text{N}^+$  group (5) of the AETAC side chain were observed in the plots for sample D (Fig. 4c). The  $\log D_p$  was found at  $-12.33$   $\text{m}^2/\text{s}$ . The plots for the mixture of samples A and D (Fig. 4b) showed resonances 6 and 7 of polyacrylamide and resonance 5 of AETAC-co-AAM. The distributions of  $D$  for samples A and D were well separated, with  $\log D_p$  values at  $-12.09$  and  $-12.27$   $\text{m}^2/\text{s}$ , respectively. Polyacrylamide (sample A) is uncharged and has a flexible chain structure, whereas AETAC-co-AAM (sample D) is a polyelectrolyte,

which we assume has a relatively expanded chain structure in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  owing to electrostatic repulsion between the charged AETAC units. We consider that the expansion of AETAC-co-AAM chains reduces the segmental mobility of the main chain and makes  $T_2$  of resonances 1–4 very small. Even with a small  $\Delta$  of 12 ms, which was achieved by the use of the Diff BBI probe, it seems difficult to observe resonances 1–4 from DOSY experiments in pure  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$ .

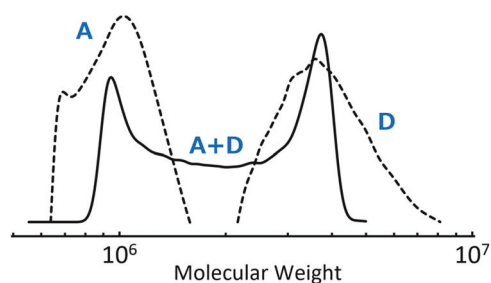
It should be noted that the  $\log D_p$  for sample A in Fig. 4b ( $-12.09$   $\text{m}^2/\text{s}$ ) was significantly smaller than that in Fig. 4a ( $-11.52$   $\text{m}^2/\text{s}$ ). We attribute the decrease in  $D_p$  when sample A was mixed with sample D to the concentration of 0.2 wt% in  $\text{D}_2\text{O}$  far exceeding the overlap concentration ( $c^*$ ). The individual polymer chains start to overlap as the concentration approaches  $c^*$ , which is defined as the concentration at which a given dilute conformation's pervaded volume is equal to the solution concentration [51]. The need to use sufficiently low-concentration samples to determine

the correct  $D$  by diffusometry has been noted in the literature [22, 32, 52, 53]. However, DOSY experiments for AETAC-*co*-AAM samples at concentrations below 0.2 wt% were impractical in terms of sensitivity of the spectrometer in the present study.

Figure 5 shows the DOSY contour plots with  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  projections of samples A and D and the mixture of samples A and D in 1 M NaCl in  $D_2O$  at 30 °C. In contrast with Fig. 4b, c, resonances 1–5 of AETAC-*co*-AAM were observed in Fig. 5b,

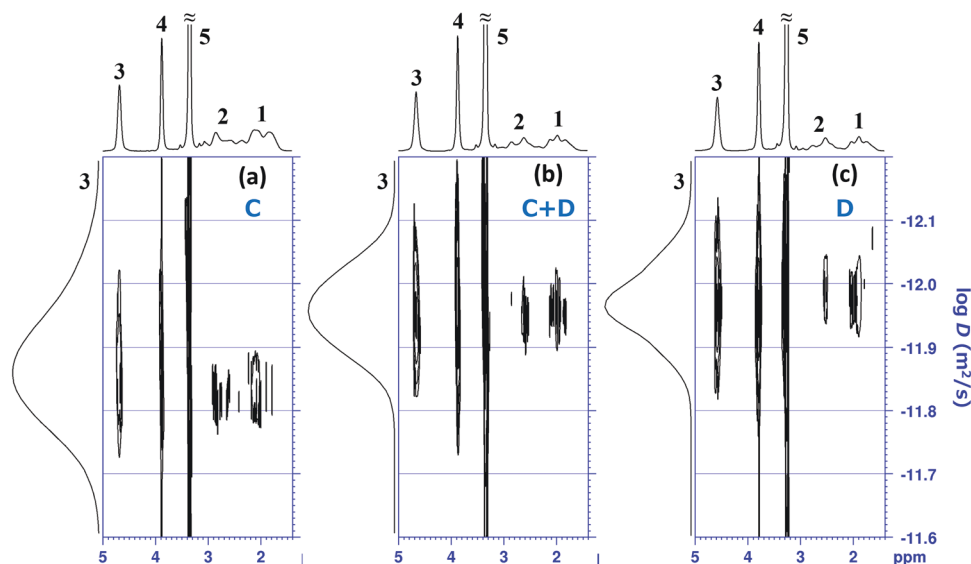


**Fig. 6** Distribution of  $D$  determined by DLS-CONTIN analysis of sample A, sample D, and a 1:1 mixture of samples A and D in 1M NaCl in  $D_2O$  at 30 °C. Sample concentration = 0.2 wt%



**Fig. 7** Molecular weight distributions of sample A, sample D, and a 1:1 mixture of samples A and D measured by SEC-MALS using 1 M NaCl in water as the eluent at 25 °C

**Fig. 8** DOSY-CONTIN contour plots with  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  projections of sample C (a), sample D (c), and a 1:1 mixture of samples C and D (b). The DOSY experiments were performed in 0.1 M NaCl in  $D_2O$  at 30 °C. Sample concentration = 0.2 wt %;  $\Delta$  = 11 ms;  $\delta$  = 3.8 ms; number of linear  $G$  steps = 128; and  $G_{128}$  = 1250, 1550, and 1500 G/cm in (a–c), respectively



c, and resonances 6 and 7 of polyacrylamide were observed in Fig. 5a, b. It was reported that the intramolecular electrostatic repulsion between charged segments by  $(CH_3)_3N^+$  in AETAC-*co*-AAM is screened by  $Cl^-$  and that polymer chain expansion is not appreciable in  $D_2O$  solution with salt [9]. As a result, the  $\log D_p$  for sample D increased markedly to  $-11.78 \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$  (Fig. 5c). The distributions of  $D$  for samples A and D in Fig. 5b separated well, with  $\log D_p$  values at  $-11.51$  and  $-11.64 \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ , respectively. These values agreed reasonably well with those determined by DLS-CONTIN analysis for sample A ( $-11.26 \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ ) and sample D ( $-11.58 \text{ m}^2/\text{s}$ ) in 1 M NaCl in  $D_2O$  at 30 °C (Fig. 6). However, we note that the  $D$  determined by DLS is a mutual-diffusion coefficient in contrast with the self-diffusion coefficient determined by DOSY. Separations of samples A and D along the diffusion axis determined by DOSY (Fig. 5b) and DLS (Fig. 6) compare unfavorably with the SEC separation, which showed a bimodal distribution of molecular weight corresponding to samples A and D (Fig. 7). We attribute the insufficient separation in the SEC curve for the mixture of samples A and D to overloading of the sample solution in the SEC-MALS instrument.

Figure 8b shows the DOSY contour plots with  $F_1$  and  $F_2$  projections of a 1:1 mixture of samples C and D in 0.1 M NaCl in  $D_2O$  at 30 °C. The  $M_w$  of sample D ( $3.9 \times 10^6$ ) was twice as large as that of sample C ( $1.9 \times 10^6$ ), and the AETAC composition of sample D (80.9 mol%) was larger than that of sample C (59.4 mol%). However, the  $F_1$  (the diffusion dimension) projection showed no sign of separation or broadening arising from the two copolymers. Thus, it appears difficult to separate the diffusion profiles of these samples by DOSY analysis under the conditions of this study.

Our results demonstrate that the inverse-geometry diffusion probe system is useful for the DOSY-CONTIN analysis of polyelectrolytes with  $M_w$  over one million in  $D_2O$

containing 0.1 to 1 M salts. This is particularly relevant to the study of sludge solutions. For example, the electrical conductivity of common sludge is approximately the same as that of 0.1 M NaCl aqueous solution (22  $\mu$ S/m) [54]. Many studies have been conducted to elucidate the mechanism of sludge dehydration using polymer flocculants, although few have focused on the structure of these polymers [55, 56]. We expect that the application of the DOSY-CONTIN method will provide information on the structure and mobility of polymer flocculants in stimulated sludge solutions.

**Acknowledgements** The Bruker AVANCE NEO 400 spectrometer with the Diff BBI probe was financially supported by the Polymer DOSY Consortium of Tokushima University.

## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

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