

Non-exclusion effects in g.p.c.: a review

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Steric exclusion is generally the predominant separation mechanism in gel chromatography. However, adsorption on the gel and dissolution inside the gel also occur, greatly disturbing solute retention and especially hindering universal calibration for polymers. Some typical examples of such effects are given. The corresponding mechanisms are discussed and the bases of methods to present non-exclusion effects are given.

INTRODUCTION

Column chromatography, using porous packings such as mineral beads of soft and rigid organic gels, is commonly used for size fractionation of polymers and the separation of low molecular weight compounds. The chromatograms obtained are a 'fingerprint' of the injected sample and provide by an appropriate mathematical treatment, an accurate characterization of the polymer (molecular weight, dispersity, chain expansion, branching, etc.). This calculation is facilitated by the universal calibration, proposed by Benoit and al.^{1,2}. A plot of $\log[\eta]M$ versus the elution volume, V_e , gives one calibration curve (Figure 1) ($[\eta]$ is the intrinsic viscosity, M the molecular weight of the solute). The plot does not depend on the eluant (at least for non-swelling gels) nor the nature and structure (rigidity, branching, etc.) of the injected polymer. These results, generally in good agreement with various experiments (see ref in ³), are based upon the assumption that the size exclusion effect is a purely entropic phenomenon, due to the decreasing number of possible configurations of a given macromolecule when it transfers from the bulk dilute solution to the vicinity of a pore wall. This aspect has been studied from a thermodynamic point of view, especially by Casassa who justified the universal calibration⁴⁻⁷ except perhaps, for macromolecules of very different structures^{3,7}. Nevertheless, serious discrepancies with universal calibration are observed. The origin of these variations and the best choice of experimental conditions to remove this difficulty will be discussed.

ABNORMAL RETENTIONS IN G.P.C.

Observed anomalies are of three types. First, the unexpected elution volumes are observed for high molecular weight compounds. This is the classical example of the polymer retained in the column: here, only oligomers are eluted (see for instance Figure 2, pure silica). In other experiments the actual calibration curve, if compared with the 'universal' one, is globally shifted in the whole range of molecular weight (see Figures 3-5). The second case is more important for low molecular weight species. Such discrepancies are more specially observed when polymers are eluted in poor solvents but for all types of packings: Altgelt⁸, Eenila⁹, Dawkins¹⁰⁻¹³ (see Figure 3), Ambler^{3,14}, Dubin^{15,16}, Otocka¹⁷, Asche¹⁸ and Krantz¹⁹ used crosslinked polystyrene gels; Kuzaev²⁰,

Berek^{21,22} (Figure 4), Dawkins²³, Eltekov²⁴, Tannikov²⁵ and Campos²⁶, silica packings; Hope²⁷, Chitumbo²⁸, Berek²⁹, Belenkii^{30,31} (Figure 5), Heitz³², Sabbagh³³, Kissing^{34,35} and Kuzaev³⁶ cellulose derivatives or other organic gels. In the third case, only the low molecular weight polymer range is affected. In the field of small molecules it was observed that the elution order was not governed only by the size of the solute³⁷⁻⁴⁰. Solid-liquid chromatography of solutes on high specific surface area mineral packings is well known, but anomalies are also observed with organic gels, especially swelling gels. The recent development of gel chromatography in the field of low molecular weight compounds⁴¹⁻⁴⁴ has pointed out the extra mechanisms involved in separation. For instance the elution volume has to decrease by increas-

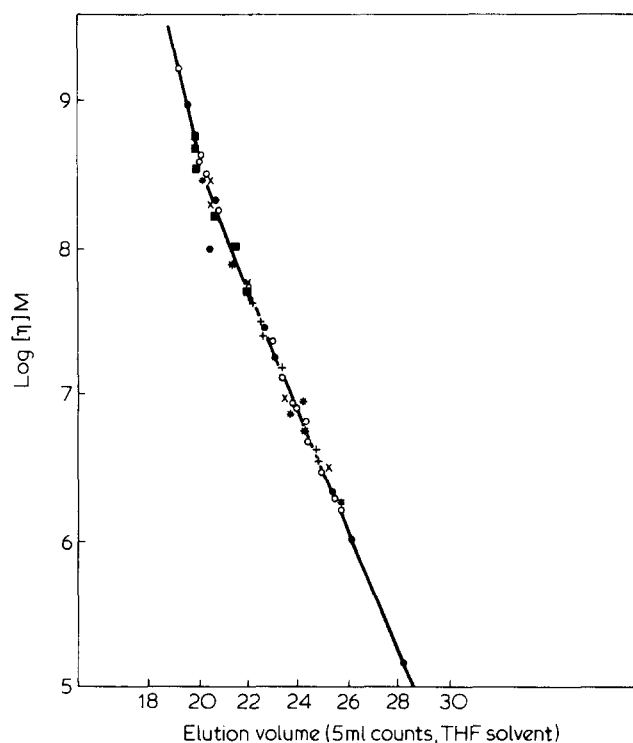


Figure 1 'Universal' calibration curve obtained for polymers of various nature and structure (from ²) ● PS; ○ PS 'comb'; + PS 'star'; * hetero graft copol; x polymethylmethacrylate; ○ polyvinylchloride; ▲ graft copol. PS-PMMA; ■ polyphenylsiloxane; ■ polybutadiene

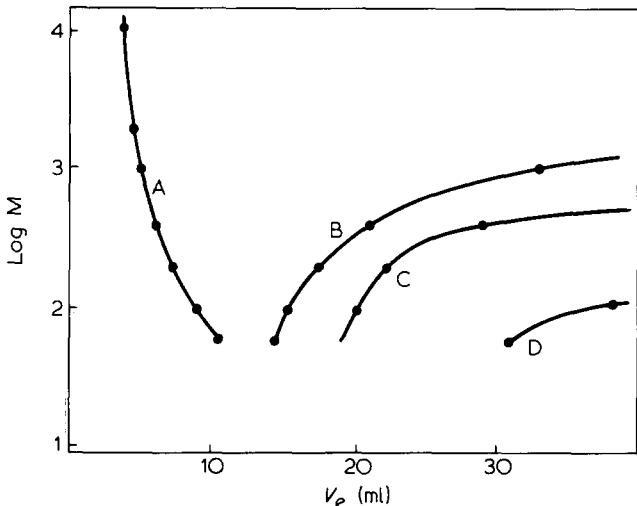


Figure 2 Elution of polyethyleneoxides by acetonitrile on pure silica (Si^{60}) and on silica grafted with polyethyleneoxide \bar{M} : 400 of various loading rates T from ⁵⁹ A - T = 15%; B - 14%; C - 8%; D - 0%, pure silica

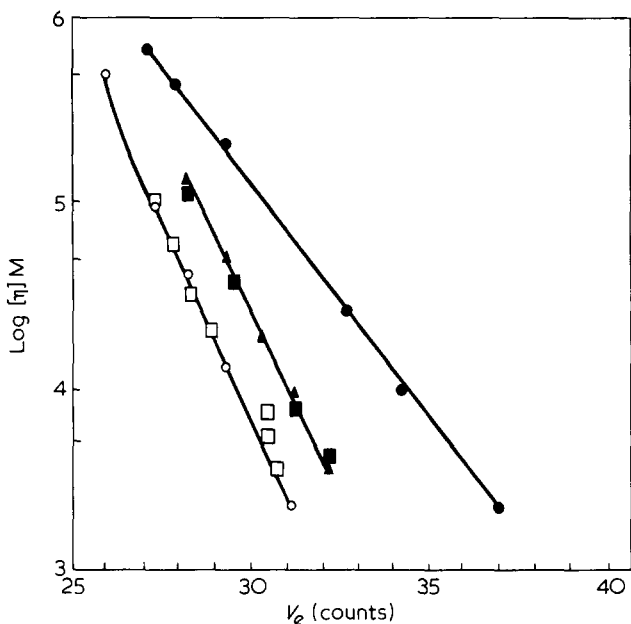


Figure 3 Hydrodynamic volume $[\eta] M$ vs. retention volume V_e calibration plots for polystyrene \circ or \bullet ; polydimethylsiloxane \square or \blacksquare ; polyisoprene \blacktriangle in cyclohexane (filled symbols) and chloroform (open symbols) at 35°C ($[\eta]$ in $dl\ mol^{-1}$; 1 count = 5 ml) (from ¹⁰)

ing the solute molecular weight in classical g.p.c.: the opposite order may be observed in some cases with swelling gels^{28-29,45-53}. A typical example is given in Figure 6: n -alkanes are eluted on a classical styrene-divinyl-benzene packing (Poragel 60 Å⁵⁴). In tetrahydrofuran (THF) the g.p.c. expected elution order is observed. Nevertheless, the elution volume of small alkanes is surprisingly high and generally higher than the total volume of the column minus the bulk volume of the gel if the gel is supposed swelled. In dimethylformamide (DMF), a poor solvent for alkanes, the elution volume increases with the molecular weight of the solute.

SEPARATION MECHANISMS

Separation mechanisms in gel chromatography have been amply discussed^{4,32,55-57,69}. In classical chromatographic

conditions it is now considered that the solute is in equilibrium between the gel and the mobile phase. So transport properties like diffusion processes or hydrodynamic flow, which are also supposed to lead to fractionation, will not be taken in account here. Besides the size exclusion effect three mechanisms may explain the shape of actual calibration curves: solvation of solute species, adsorption on the pore walls of packings and, for swelling packings, partition between gel and whole phase.

Solvation of solutes

In the size exclusion separation of rigid molecules it was soon proved that the calibration curve had to be established not with the molar volume of the solute but with the volume of the solvated species. The difference of solvation between two compounds of closed bulkiness may be an element in their separation^{83,84}. For polymers, solvation also occurs and is especially observed when the mobile phase is a liquid mixture. In that case a preferential solvation appears. It can be

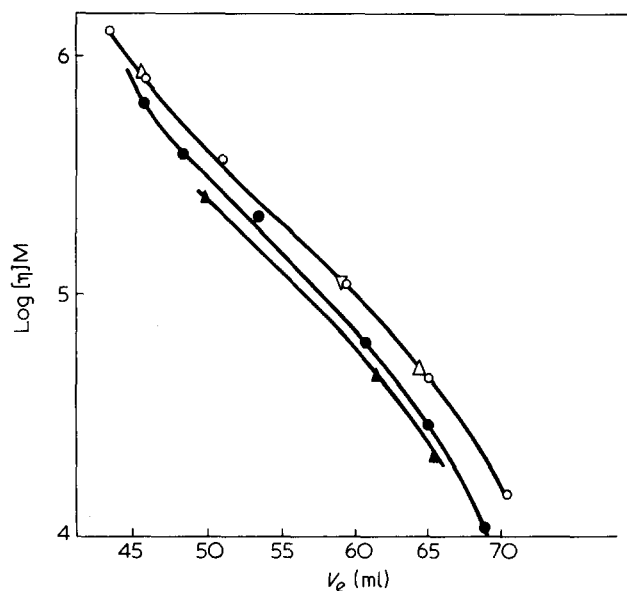


Figure 4 'Universal' calibration curves of polystyrene in benzene (\circ); chloroform (Δ); theta mixtures benzene/methanol (\bullet); and chloroform/methanol (\blacktriangle) (from ²¹)

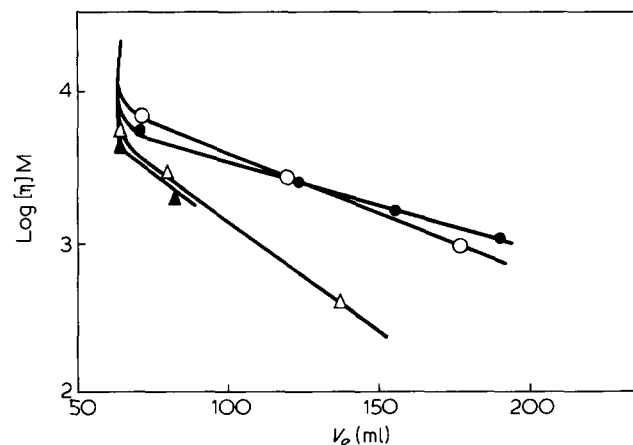


Figure 5 Relation between the retention volumes of macromolecules and their hydrodynamic dimensions using G-100 Sephadex (from ³⁰). \circ - dextran; \bullet - polyvinylpyrrolidone; Δ - polyethyleneglycol; \blacktriangle - polyvinylalcohol

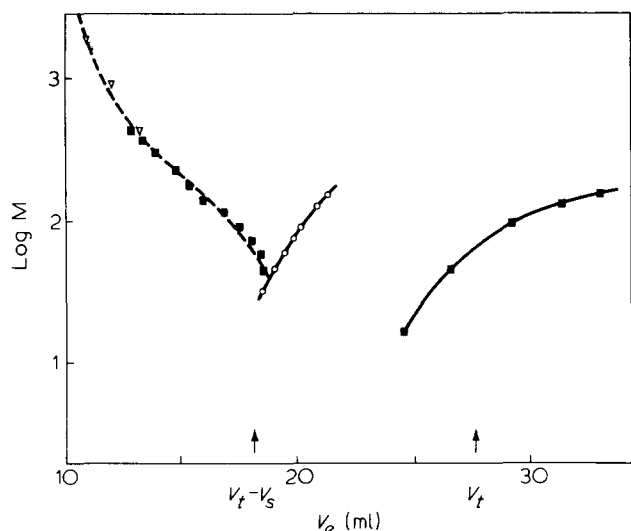


Figure 6 Relation between the retention volume of some solutes and their molecular weight in various eluents. Packing: cross-linked styrene-divinylbenzene gel (Poragel 60 A). V_t : internal volume of the column. V_s : volume of the dry packing (from ⁵⁴). — — — — THF; ■ — alkane; ○ — n-alcohol; △ — POE

studied by g.p.c.^{21,26,85-87,90}. If the solvation must always be taken into account it cannot explain the important discrepancies in calibration curves previously described.

Dissolution mechanism

In the case of the dissolution of alkanes in DMF, shown in Figure 6, the unexpected elution order cannot be governed by adsorption on styrene-divinylbenzene network because this elution order is not observed with a rigid gel of the same nature. In a general way a solute partition occurs with swelled gels and these act as a liquid phase as in classical liquid-liquid chromatography. Particularly with lipophilic gels (e.g. polystyrene gels) used with polar mobile phases, solutes are eluted according to the behaviour of reverse phase chromatography^{28,29,45,53}. This partition was put forward to explain elution data on swelling gel^{15,26,28,33,48-50,58,60,61}. It has to occur, of course, even with a non-macroporous gel and in this case the basic chromatographic law is:

$$V_e = V_o + K_D V_g$$

(V_o is the void volume, K_D the partition coefficient of the solute between the gel and the mobile phase and V_g the volume of the stationary phase, here the swelled gel). Experimental evidence of dissolution mechanism was clearly proposed by Benoit, Rempp *et al.*⁶²⁻⁶⁴, who prepared 'tailor-made' non-macroporous polystyrene gels in which the distance between two cross-linking points is well defined. They studied the partition of linear polystyrene in various organic solvents between the swelled gel phase and the solvent. Batch experiments and also chromatographic essays are described. As indicated in Figure 7, a partition mechanism leading to fractionation occurs. In this case the elution volume (or K_D) increases when the molecular weight of the solute decreases. For a given solute K_D increases with the size of the gel segments between two cross-linking points. Motozato who studied the relationship between network structure and molecular size of permeable substances observed similar results⁶⁵. A theory of macromolecule partition in a gel was proposed by De Ruvo⁶⁶, Belenkii *et al.*³¹ and especially

Lecourtier *et al.*^{67,68}: by taking as size unity the molar volume of the solvent, K_D can be expressed in the simplified form

$$\log K_D = DP [\log(1 - \phi_g) + \phi_g(\chi_{gs} + \chi_{ps} - \chi_{pg})]$$

where ϕ_g is the volume fraction of the gel in the swollen gel, χ_{ij} the Flory interaction parameter related to segment interaction of gel (g) solute (p) and solvent (s) and DP has the dimension of the polymerization degree of the solute. This formula indicates that there is no dissolution effect for non-swelling gels (K_D is 0 for $\phi_g = 1$). For a given chemical nature of the eluting species (χ_{ij} constant) the partition coefficient increases with the swelling of the gel. For poor swelling K_D increases (from 0 to 1) when the molecular weight of the solute decreases. For increasing values of the swelling, if the solute-gel interactions are important ($\chi_{pg} < 0$) and the solute-eluent interactions are low ($\chi_{ps} > 0$), the term between brackets might be positive. Then, K_D increases with the molecular weight of the solute. For a given family of solutes $\log K_D$ is proportional to their molecular weight (at least when the χ_{ij} are independent of the molecular size); this is a typical behaviour observed in reverse phase chromatography. Experimental results previously described are correctly predicted, at least qualitatively, by these theoretical considerations.

Adsorption mechanism

If the dissolution mechanism affects only the low molecular weight range of the solutes (the larger the swelling, the larger is this range), adsorption (liquid-solid chromatography) may occur for any solute. It is sometimes difficult to pre-

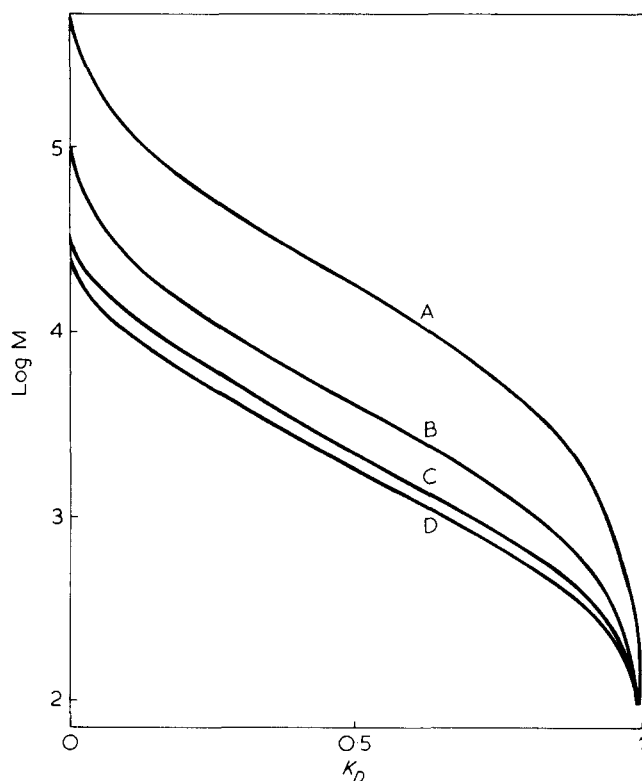


Figure 7 Partition coefficients in systems polystyrene-THF-gel. The various gels used are 'tailor made' gels characterized by the molecular weight of polystyrene precursor (size of the macromolecular chain between two cross-linking points (from ⁶²). A - 95 000; B - 45 000; C - 21 300; D - 10 600

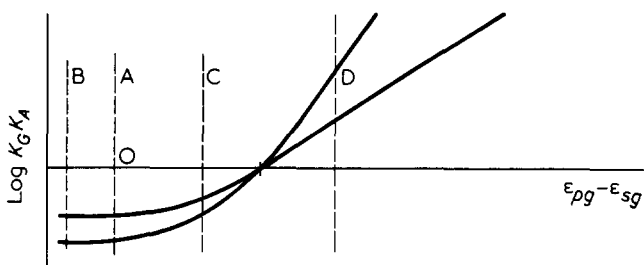


Figure 8 Relation between the global partition coefficient on a porous sorbent and the difference of interaction energy of solvent and polymer units towards the support (from ⁹²)

dict the respective part of these two mechanisms, especially with modified gels leading to specific interactions with the solute^{34,35,70-73}. With these 'reactive gels'⁷⁴⁻⁷⁶ it is not clear if, in the chromatographic conditions, interactions occur either only onto the surface of the porous structure or inside the bulk of the gel. Different ways have been used to describe solute adsorption⁷⁷⁻⁷⁹. Klein's model is related to solutes with rigid molecules⁸⁰. It takes into account the tortuosity of the porous structure⁸¹ which prevents solute molecules from having access to the porous volume. When solute sizes are rather small if compared with pore dimensions the elution volume is given by a very simple relation:

$$V_e = V_o + (K_G + K_A)V_p$$

expressing the additivity of GPC (K_G) and adsorption (K_A) effects (V_p is the porous volume). In the general case K_A has to be modified by taking in account the relative loss of pore surface accessibility due to tortuosity. Predicted calibration curves look like those observed in Figure 2. The Dawkins' model is more convenient for macromolecular solutes⁸². When polymers are separated by steric exclusion alone the elution volume is given by

$$V_e = V_o + K_G V_p$$

If adsorption occurs, it can be characterized by an affinity coefficient related to the surface area unit. If it is assumed that the porous structure in beads is simple, the total surface area is directly proportional to the porous volume. If the two mechanisms are cumulative, the elution volume is then

$$V_e = V_o + K_G K_A V_p$$

where K_A is related to adsorption (positive adsorption or repulsion). This formula is fairly well verified for different experimental results^{10-12,61,69,82}.

A more complete view on the molecular scale is given by the studies of Tennikov and Belenkii *et al.*^{25,91,92}. Let us consider a dilute solution of a flexible polymer in the vicinity of a pore. In a pure size exclusion mechanism, the concentration in polymer units gradually decreases from the bulk solution to the pore wall and becomes zero on the surface according to a law which may be calculated⁹³. Concentration profiles are modified if other mechanisms occur. An overconcentration is observed for positive adsorption, and the contrary for repulsion. The free energy change when a polymer molecule transfers from the mobile phase to a pore within the gel not only depends on the size of the macromolecule but also on the difference of interaction energy of solvent and polymer segment towards the gel $\epsilon = (\epsilon_{pg} - \epsilon_{sg})$.

Calculations, based on the classical theory of polymer adsorption^{94,95}, lead to a general behaviour of flexible macromolecules in the vicinity of a rigid wall. A pure size exclusion mechanism has to be considered only as a particular case, where no enthalpic effect is operative. From this calculation the elution volume is given by the equation proposed by Dawkins. $K_G K_A$ is expressed versus $(\epsilon_{pg} - \epsilon_{sg})$ in Figure 8.

Below a critical value ϵ_c of the energy term ϵ , the loss of entropy resulting from adsorption is not balanced by the stability gain occurring from interactions with the surface and the resulting calibration curves are given in Figure 9: (A) without enthalpic effect; (B) there is a repulsion between the gel and macromolecular segments; (C) slightly positive interaction effect. For the value ϵ_c there is no segment concentration drop from the bulk solution to the pore wall, so all the solutes are eluted at the volume $V_o + V_p$. For $\epsilon > \epsilon_c$ adsorption predominates (D). These theoretical predications have been successfully compared with experimental results in column²⁵ and thin layer⁹¹ chromatography. They explain other published data (see for instance Figure 3, 4, 5). Nevertheless, refinements will be probably necessary because the calculation does not take into account the polymer-solvent interactions which undoubtedly take a part in the adsorption phenomenon (as in gel partition).

PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

Extra exclusion effects need not be eliminated in a chromatographic procedure, especially in the case of low molecular weight solutes, because a complementary resolution is obtained.

Organic porous swelling gels appear to be very attractive packings for direct or reverse phase chromatography, especially in the preparative scale where they have reasonable efficiency and high capacity⁹⁶. If universal calibration is the objective, experimental precautions must be taken into account. Unfortunately, in gel filtration, packings swell and a dissolution effect is always possible. In high pressure g.p.c. with organic gels, only the low molecular weight range fraction swells in practice. Their omission from the column set may save time and money, and improve the reliability of measurements if the sample has no fractions with molecular weight lower than 1000.

In a general way, to avoid both adsorption and dissolution, chromatographic conditions must be chosen with high polymer-solvent and gel-solvent interactions and poor polymer-gel affinity. This is generally obtained by a convenient choice of the eluent. A mixture of solvents, with a

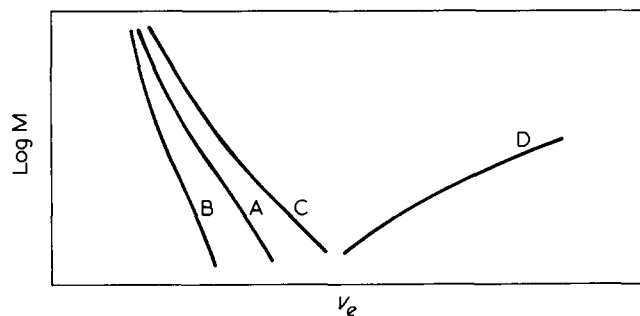


Figure 9 Calibration curves corresponding to various values of $\epsilon_{pg} - \epsilon_{sg}$ (see Figure 8)

minor constituent leading to strong interactions with the packing, and the major an adequate solubility of the sample, may give good results^{15,25,97-99}. For drastic adsorptions only the gel surface change leads to a reduction in adsorption. These bonded gels have been widely used in g.p.c. and commercial packings of this type are now available^{44,100}. The incidence of polyoxyethylene silica grafting ($\bar{M} = 400$) on the calibration curve of linear polyoxyethylene in acetonitrile is given in Figure 2. The strong adsorption observed in pure silica progressively decreases when the rate of grafting increases. Finally the classical shape of calibration curve is recovered. Nevertheless if such a procedure eliminates, or at least strongly minimizes, the adsorption process, the grafted phase creates a dissolution effect^{59,86,101} which may again disturb the exclusion size effects. Small grafts (no dissolution in the grafted phase) leading to total coverage of the packing surface are the most efficient.

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