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Bimodality as a signal of Liquid-Gas phase transition in nuclei?

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We use the HIPSE (Heavy-Ion Phase-Space Exploration) Model to discuss the origin of the bimodality in charge asymmetry observed in nuclear reactions around the Fermi energy. We show that it may be related to the important angular momentum (spin) transferred into the quasi-projectile before secondary decay. As the spin overcomes the critical value, a sudden opening of decay channels is induced and leads to a bimodal distribution for the charge asymmetry. In the model, it is not assigned to a liquid-gas phase transition but to specific instabilities in nuclei with high spin. Therefore, we propose to use these reactions to study instabilities in rotating nuclear droplets.

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In recent years, the possibility to observe phase transitions in finite, even small systems, has received an increasing interest [1, 2, 3, 4]. In this context, several conceptual questions are addressed, as the extrapolation of thermodynamical properties, or more generally Statistical Mechanics, from finite to infinite systems. For instance, a system with phase transition has discontinuity in the equation of state in the transition region. Such a discontinuity is not present in finite systems but is expected to be replaced by anomalies in specific statistical quantities.

This remarkable aspect has led to propose different signals that might be related to the observation of a phase transition in mesoscopic systems. Thus, a possible signature of liquid-gas phase transition in finite systems is the appearance of abnormal fluctuations in the kinetic energy [5] in microcanonical ensemble, these being at the origin of the so-called negative heat capacity. Equivalently, a bimodal behaviour, i.e. two "bumps" in the energy distribution is expected in the coexistence region, the system being treated canonically. Bimodalities in event distributions is even sometimes promoted as one of the definition of phase transition in finite systems [4, 6]. Indeed, it is related to the anomalous curvature of the entropy or any relevant thermodynamical potential depending on the constraints upon the system (see however [7]). In addition, several studies have shown that this signal is rather robust with respect to the introduction of an additional constraint [8] on the system or the long-range coulomb force [9].

Nuclei appear as possible candidates to observe liquid-gas phase transition in finite quantum system. Indeed, a large variety of experimental studies [10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22] reports an accumulation of "evidences" of critical signals. Among them, bimodality in the charge asymmetry of fragments produced in

heavy-ion reactions at Fermi energies have been recently reported for the quasi-projectiles isolated in peripheral reactions [21, 22]. This signal is presented as one of the most robust evidence for the liquid-gas phase transition in nuclei. However, the extraction of critical signals from nuclear reactions is far from being simple. The first reason is that part of information on the decaying systems is missing (for instance detection is not complete). A second important aspect comes from the definition of the order parameter, the latter being ill-defined in experimental situations. This has led to rather sophisticated protocols for event sorting. Finally, one expects that a signal initially present at the chemical freeze-out (i.e. when nuclei do not exchange particles anymore) will be largely distorted, or even completely washed out by the secondary decay. This raises the fundamental question of the phase-space explored during the reaction just after fragment formation and its modification due to thermal emission.

Recently, the phenomenological HIPSE model [23] has been developed to address these aspects. In this model, very specific randomness hypotheses are retained to form clusters in the first instants of the reaction, while information on the phase-space explored before and after secondary decay can be accessed without ambiguity. This model, as well as the recently developed version for nucleon-induced reactions (called n-IPSE) [24], has been shown to remarkably reproduce experimental observations.

In this work, we use the HIPSE model to address the question of the origin of the bimodality signal in nuclear reactions. First the experimental protocol used in refs. [21, 22] is recalled. This protocol is applied to events generated with the HIPSE model showing that bimodality is found. Finally, we use the possibility to access the phase-space before the secondary decay to understand the origin of this signal in the model.

We have then generated 10^6 heavy ions collisions for the Xe+Sn system at 50 MeV/nucleon. The full impact parameter distribution, ranging from the grazing to the

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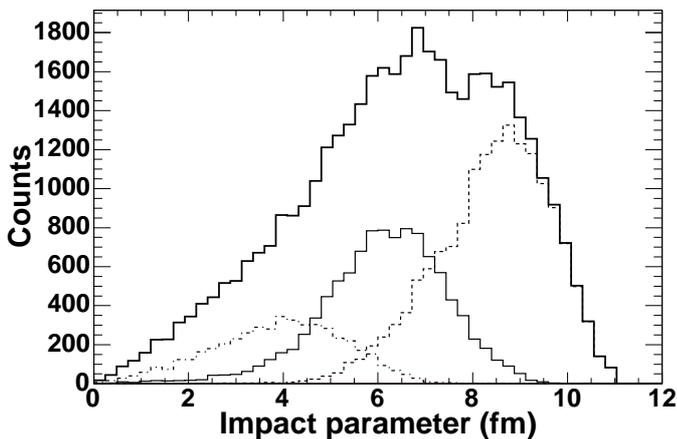


FIG. 1: Impact parameter distribution corresponding to complete QP events (thick solid line), for QT transverse energy selection of $E_{t12}^{QT} < 60$ MeV (dashed), $120 \text{ MeV} < E_{t12}^{QT} < 180$ MeV (thin solid line) and $240 \text{ MeV} < E_{t12}^{QT} < 300$ MeV (dot-dashed line).

head-on collisions has been generated. A complete description of the model as well as a discussion of the hypotheses used for cluster formation can be found in refs. [23, 24]. In order to get results directly comparable to those obtained with the INDRA 4π array, we have filtered the events and used exactly the same experimental protocol (event sorting) as described in refs. [21, 22]. We first use a completeness criterion. Here, 'filtered' events, corresponding to the best detection of the Quasi-Projectile (QP), are selected (80% of the projectile); this selection ensures a quasi-complete detection of the QP products, and due to the forward detection acceptance of INDRA retains mainly semi-peripheral reactions (see Fig. 1).

Complete QP events are then sorted by using the transverse energy of the light charged particles ($Z=1,2$) coming from the Quasi-Target (QT), noted E_{t12}^{QT} . By doing so, we avoid the obvious autocorrelations between the sorting observable (QT) and the considered system (QP). Note that in the experiment as well as in the simulation, the QP selection has been made by taking fragments with positive center-of-mass velocities [22]; this assumption has been checked with HIPSE and is indeed correct; selecting fragments coming from the true QP source or with positive center-of mass velocities leads to the very same results for this analysis.

In the study of bimodality [21, 22], QT transverse energy is assumed to be indirectly related to the order parameter and is presented as a way of realizing a "canonical" event sorting. Although the transverse energy is intimately correlated to the centrality of the reaction, the latter assumption is, in our opinion, far from being clear because of the associated large mixing of impact parameters (see Fig. 1).

In the following, we will focus on the correlation between the largest and the second largest fragment emit-

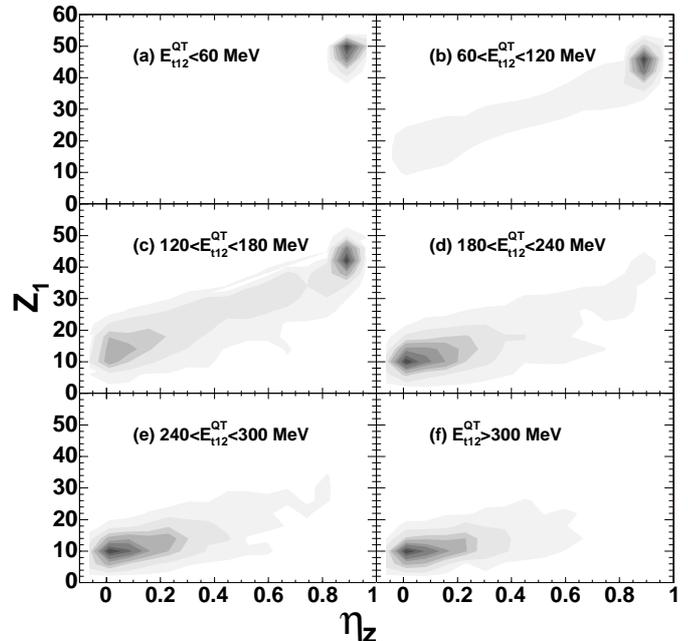


FIG. 2: Correlation between the largest fragment Z_1 and the charge asymmetry η_Z for different bins of E_{t12}^{QT} .

ted in the forward center-of-mass hemisphere. We then define the charge asymmetry η_Z between the two largest fragments [22] as:

$$\eta_Z = \frac{Z_1 - Z_2}{Z_1 + Z_2} \quad (1)$$

where Z_1 and Z_2 are respectively the largest and the second largest fragment charges. Thus, η_Z is close to 1 for a large asymmetry and it will be the case if an evaporation residue persists after de-excitation. By variance, if $\eta_Z \approx 0$, it corresponds to a symmetric fragmentation.

Fig. 2 displays the correlation between Z_1 and η_Z for different QT transverse energy intervals. Fig. 2(a) shows a single component located at $\eta_Z \approx 1$ and $Z_1 \approx Z_{proj}$. This case corresponds to the evaporation residue (ER) of the projectile. In Fig. 2(b) to Fig. 2(f), we observe a different component, located this time at $\eta_Z \approx 0$ and $Z_1 \approx 15$; the corresponding mean fragment multiplicity is here greater than 2, corresponding to the multifragmentation regime (MF).

In Fig. 2(c), the correlation clearly exhibits both components, the asymmetric case (ER) and the symmetric one (MF). This coexistence has been assigned to a bimodality signal in the fragmenting nuclear systems [22]. Indeed, by projecting the two-dimensional distribution either on the x -axis or y -axis, two bumps are observed respectively in the distribution of η_Z and Z_1 (not shown here) for the selected intermediate transverse energy. These results are similar to those obtained in the experimental case [22], where a bimodality in η_Z has been reported for the QP events.

Let us now specify the properties of the two event

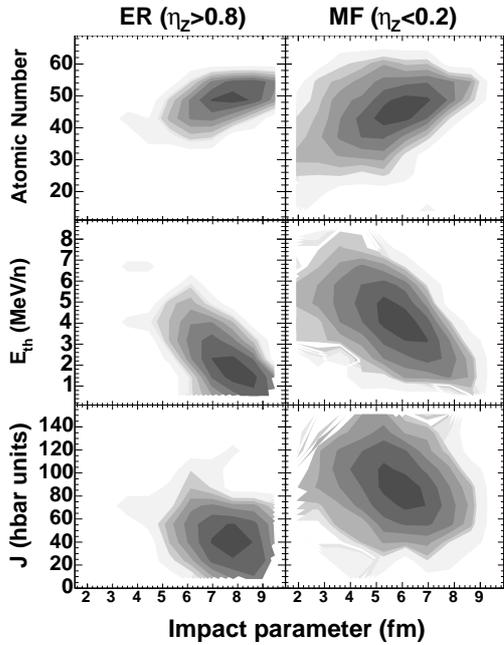


FIG. 3: Correlation between the atomic number (top row), the thermal energy (middle) and spin (bottom) of the QP source for events of Fig. 2(c). The left column corresponds to the ER case and the right to MF case.

classes observed in Fig. 2(b) and 2(c). The charge partition may mix contributions from quasi-projectile and/or mid-rapidity emissions. Indeed, it results from a possible *simultaneous* emission leading to a fragmented freeze-out configuration followed by a *sequential* decay of each primary fragments. In the HIPSE model both effects are taken into account and the initial partition before secondary decay can be easily identified. In particular, the number of sources contributing to the bimodality is of major interest. By tracing back the origin of clusters in HIPSE during the decay, we have observed that the bimodality signal displayed in Fig. 2 is dominated by events where a single source is formed in the forward center-of-mass hemisphere, this source corresponding indeed to the excited QP.

To get a deeper insight on the origin of bimodality in HIPSE, it is necessary to clearly identify the phase-space explored by the QP before de-excitation for the two event classes. Here, we concentrate on Fig. 2(c) and we will refer to ER for events with $\eta_Z > 0.8$ and MF for $\eta_Z < 0.2$. Fig. 3 presents respectively from top to bottom the correlation between the size, the thermal energy¹, the transferred angular momentum and the impact parameter for ER (left) and for MF (right). The first remarkable aspect appearing in top panels of Fig. 3 is that

the source sizes are not significantly different between ER ($Z_{QP} \approx 50$) and MF case ($Z_{QP} \approx 45$) and the two distributions strongly overlap. By contrast, the thermal energy E_{th} is much higher in the MF ($E_{th}/A \approx 4 MeV$) than in the ER case ($E_{th}/A \approx 1.5 MeV$). It is worth noticing that such a result is at variance with a geometrical scenario like 'abrasion-ablation' models where such an increase of thermal energy is accompanied by a strong decrease of the QP size [25]. Indeed, in the HIPSE model, while the QP and QT are initially formed using geometrical arguments, the abrasion picture is partially (or even completely) relaxed by allowing nucleon exchange and by the strong reorganisation due to Final State Interaction (FSI) [26]. For the beam energy considered here ($50 A MeV$), an important exchange of particle between the target and projectile should also be accompanied by a large transfer of orbital into intrinsic angular momentum (spin). This is indeed confirmed in bottom part of Fig. 3 where the correlation between the QP angular momentum (noted J) and the impact parameter is displayed. Again, we observed that while ER corresponds in average to $J \approx 30\hbar$, in MF much higher angular momenta are obtained ($J \approx 80\hbar$).

Consequently, the two classes of events associated to bimodality are issued from the de-excitation of a single-source with more or less the same mass but rather different initial conditions in term of thermal energy and angular momentum. Note that here, the de-excitation is performed in both cases using the statistical sequential decay model of ref. [27]. Therefore, in HIPSE, the appearance of the two contributions in Fig. 2 is a direct consequence of the statistical decay accounting for the initial properties of the QP. To go further, we have performed statistical simulations for a given nucleus ($Z = 50$) by varying the initial thermal energy and spin. Fig. 4 shows the corresponding η_Z distributions. If the spin is set to zero (top row), we see that the higher the thermal energy, the smaller the charge asymmetry is, but we never obtain a crossover to small values of η_Z . The situation is clearly different when the spin is changed. We see in Fig. 4 that at low spin ($J = 0\hbar$ and $30\hbar$) and high spin ($J = 90\hbar$) only a single contribution exists respectively corresponding to high and low η_Z values. In opposite, for spin $J = 60 - 70\hbar$, we observe a sudden transition where both contributions coexist. This transition appears to be almost independent on the thermal energy. Therefore, the bimodality observed in Fig. 4 is related to a transition governed by the spin transferred in the collision, but is not of the liquid-gas type as concluded in [22].

The physical origin of this bimodal behaviour in the statistical decay can be inferred from the value of the spin associated to the transition. Indeed, it corresponds approximately to the limit of stability of a nucleus with $Z \approx 50$ against prompt fission [28]. At that point, the fission barrier height becomes comparable to the energy of the least-bound particle and the nucleus cannot resist to the deposited spin. In the statistical model this cor-

¹ Note that here the total thermal energy is connected to the temperature of the QP before secondary decay through the standard Fermi-Gas formula $E_{th} = aT^2$ with $a = A/10 MeV^{-1}$.

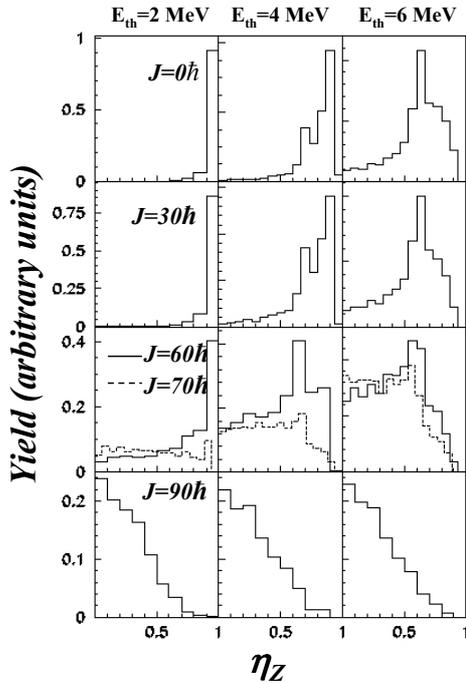


FIG. 4: η_z distributions for the statistical de-excitation of an ^{120}Sn nucleus for different initial thermal energies E_{th} (from left to right) and spins J (from top to bottom).

responds to a sudden opening of decay channels leading to the low η_z contribution. It is worthwhile to mention that the description of such instability through a statistical model is certainly an approximation. Actually, in a complete dynamical description of this instability we do expect that the system breaks almost at the same time as it is formed. In the HIPSE model, the system is assumed to be formed and then explore statistically accessible final configurations; it is certainly a too simplistic picture and calls for further theoretical developments. Nevertheless, from the HIPSE scenario which has provided a good reproduction of a large number of experimental observations [23, 29], we conclude that nuclear systems close or beyond their limit of resistance with respect to spin deposition, are formed, leading then to a bimodal behavior. Therefore, heavy-ion induced reactions might be a tool to study the emergence of shape bifurcation associated to high spin, called the Jacobi sequence [30]. This is a very interesting aspect which has not been explored in this context. If this interpretation is confirmed, instead of a liquid-gas phase transition, we may have an experimental signature of the so-called Jacobi transition [31], which is related to a second-order phase transition in the continuous limit and has also its equivalent in astrophysical context [32].

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