

Comparison of the interfacial activity between homogeneous and Janus gold nanoparticles by pendant drop tensiometry

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Abstract

The interfacial activity of 3.5 nm homogeneous (HPs) and amphiphilic Janus gold nanoparticles (JPs) was characterized by pendant drop tensiometry for water/air and water/decane interfaces. This technique requires a lower quantity of nanoparticles than the traditional Langmuir balance technique. The direct deposition at the interface of the nanoparticles dispersed in a spreading solvent further requires lower quantities of sample than the adsorption from the bulk. From the growing and shrinking of the pendant drops, the interfacial activity of the

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nanoparticles can be evaluated and compared within a wide range of area per particle. In this work, the JPs exhibited a higher interfacial activity than the HPs in all cases. A hard disk model fits the piecewise compression isotherm of the HPs; yet this model underestimates the interactions between the JPs adsorbed at the interface.

Keywords: Janus gold nanoparticle; Interfacial activity; Water/air interface; Water/oil interface; Pendant drop tensiometry.

Introduction

Janus nanoparticles are anisotropic colloidal entities with two regions of different physicochemical properties. This anisotropy can lead to spontaneous self-assembly of the nanoparticles or to be responsive to an external stimulus such as magnetic or electric fields, pH or temperature gradients, etc.^{1,2} Depending on the particular anisotropy of the nanoparticles, they cover a wide range of applications such as biosensors,² drugdelivery and immunotherapy,³ water-repellent textile⁴ or nanoparticles that become aligned in an external electric or magnetic field.⁵⁻⁷

Janus nanoparticles with a wettability anisotropy can be used to stabilize Pickering emulsions. Unlike homogeneous nanoparticles, amphiphilic Janus nanoparticles can exhibit high interfacial activity regardless of the degree of amphiphilicity, due to the spatial separation of the different wettability regions.⁸ Thus, amphiphilic Janus-like gold nanoparticles functionalized with thiol-terminated polyethylene glycol chains and short alkane-thiols have been used as water/oil emulsion stabilizers because they rearrange when placed at the interface.⁹ Moreover, Janus gold nanoparticles half functionalized with polydopamine show that the electrostatic repulsion between nanoparticles determine the resulting particle self-assembly at water/oil interfaces as a result of the hydrophilic polydopamine and hydrophobic gold faces of each particle.¹⁰ In addition, micrometer-sized Janus gold-silica nanoparticles have been found to stabilize water/oil emulsions for longer than one year, compared to 2 h of demulsification when homogeneous silica nanoparticles were used.¹¹ Importantly, not only the wettability contrast of the Janus nanoparticles conditions the interfacial activity, their morphology also controls the interfacial activity at a given water/oil interface, which determines the packing behavior of the Janus nanoparticles.¹² Thereby, nonspherical emulsion droplets have been

obtained by using Janus nanoparticles with asymmetrical morphology.¹³

There are different synthesis strategies involving bulk methods in which the Janus nanoparticles are synthesized in a solvent, usually *one pot* methods.^{6,9,14} On the other hand, other strategies involve the particles to be placed at a given liquid interface to be functionalized,^{15,16} usually resulting in noticeably lower quantities of Janus nanoparticles than in bulk methods. The Langmuir film balance technique is widely used to characterize the interfacial activity and arrangement of nanoparticles at water/air and water/oil interfaces.^{16–20} Another experimental approach is to use the growing/shrinking drop tensiometry^{21,22} because the quantity of nanoparticles required is much lower than for a standard Langmuir film balance experiment. Nevertheless, a certain amount of nanoparticles is still necessary for the experiments that involve the adsorption of Janus nanoparticles at the interface of a pendant drop from the bulk.^{2,15,23,24} When the sample amount available is insufficient to study the adsorption from the bulk to the interface of the pendant drop, the direct deposition of the nanoparticles at the pendant drop interface from a volatile solvent allows the study of the interfacial activity. Moreover, solvent evaporation is a violent and rapid process which helps the nanoparticles to be adsorbed at the interface of the pendant drop, faster than diffusion from the bulk toward the pendant drop interface.²⁵ This technique enables to control the amount of nanoparticles deposited at the pendant drop interface.

The simplest model to describe the interfacial arrangement of the nanoparticles at the interface is the hard disk model in which the nanoparticles are represented by hard entities placed at the interface. The nanoparticles do not interact when there is enough room for every nanoparticle, but they become close-packed when the area per particle is sufficiently low.²⁶ However, when the nanoparticles are functionalized with large polymers, Monte Carlo simulations and experimental data show a complex behavior compared to hard objects at liquid/liquid interfaces.²⁷

In this study, we characterized the interfacial activity of 3.5 nm diameter homogeneous gold nanoparticles capped with hexanethiol and Janus gold nanoparticles with hydrophobic hexanethiolates on one hemisphere and hydrophilic 2-(2-mercapto-ethoxy)ethanol on the other. The pendant drop technique enabled to study the interfacial activity of those particles at the water/air and water/decane interfaces. Moreover, due to the low amount of nanoparticles available, the nanoparticles dispersed in a volatile solvent were directly deposited at the pendant drop water/air interface using a microsyringe. By controlled deposition of a desired amount of nanoparticles at the pendant drop interface and subsequent shrinking-growing cycles of the pen-

dant drop we studied the different interfacial arrangements of the nanoparticles for different values of drop area available per nanoparticle.

Materials and Methods

Sample preparation

Homogeneous gold nanoparticles capped with hexanethiol (HPs) were synthesized following the Brust's protocol.²⁸ Janus gold nanoparticles (JPs) were synthesized by functionalizing a hemisphere of the HPs with 2-(2-Mercapto-Ethoxy)Ethanol (MEE) using the Chen's protocol.^{16,20} The terminal groups were $-CH_3$ and $-OH$ for the hexanethiol and MEE functionalized hemispheres, respectively. The Janus morphology of JPs was thoroughly evaluated by Chen and co-workers in refs.^{16,20,29} They reported contact angle measurements of nanoparticle ensembles,¹⁶ AFM adhesion force measurements of individual nanoparticles²⁹ as well as NOESY NMR measurements of the polarization interactions between neighboring spins of the nanoparticle surface capping ligands.¹⁶ The wettability differences between hexanethiol and MEE terminal groups suggest an interfacial activity of the JPs. Both nanoparticles were redispersed separately in tetrahydrofuran (THF) as spreading agent. The JP diameter quantified from High Resolution TEM micrographs of the isolated nanoparticles was $(3.5 \pm 0.9) \text{ nm}$ (see Fig. 1a and 1b).

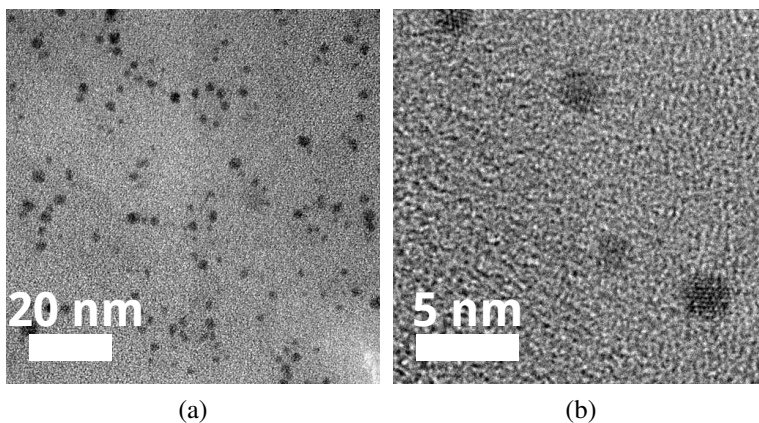


Figure 1: (a) High Resolution TEM micrograph of the JPs studied. (b) High Resolution TEM micrograph of the JPs at greater magnification.

Electrophoretic mobility

The electrophoretic mobility of both HPs and JPs was measured with a Zetasizer Nano device (Malvern) in a $10^{-2} M$ sodium citrate MilliQ water solution and these were the values found: $\mu_{e,HP} = (-1.1 \pm 0.7) \cdot 10^{-8} m^2/(V \cdot s)$ and $\mu_{e,JP} = (-2.2 \pm 1.5) \cdot 10^{-8} m^2/(V \cdot s)$. The 1:1 electrolyte added to the nanoparticle solutions enabled to measure stable mobility values because the electrical double layer of both nanoparticles was fairly stabilized.

Growing and shrinking pendant drop

We used a home-made pendant drop tensiometer³⁰ that enables to change the drop volume and area using a microinjector (Hamilton). The volume of a water pendant drop, usually in the range of 10 to 30 μl , allows working with lower quantities of nanoparticle rather than the higher working volumes of the traditional Langmuir balance tensiometer.¹⁶⁻²⁰ The growing and shrinking of the pendant drop volume enables different nanoparticle arrangements at the interface, once that a fixed amount of nanoparticles is adsorbed. Real time drop images are processed by Axisymmetric Drop Shape Analysis Profile (ADSA-P)³¹ providing the pendant drop area and surface tension. Water/oil interfaces can be explored with the pendant drop tensiometer readily by submerging the pendant drop in oil. In this study decane (Sigma-Aldrich), as received, was used as the oil phase.

To perform a growing and shrinking pendant drop experiment, first it is necessary to adsorb the nanoparticles at the drop interface. Usually, the experiments are performed with adsorption of the nanoparticles from the bulk to the pendant drop interface.^{2,12,23,24} But when the quantity of nanoparticles available is insufficient for this kind of study, the direct deposition of the desired amount of nanoparticles in a spreading solvent at the interface with a microsyringe is an alternative. In this study, the spreading solvent used was THF and the deposition was performed onto the surface of a 5 μl -MilliQ water pendant drop in air with a 5 μl -microsyringe (Hamilton) and a micropositioner. Immediately after the deposition of the nanoparticles, the surface tension decreased markedly because of the spreading solvent. While the THF was evaporating, the volume of the pendant drop was slowly increased at 0.08 $\mu l/s$ up to the final 20 μl volume and maintained until the surface tension was stable. Thereby, this process avoided the fall of the pendant drop due to

the abrupt decrease in the surface tension because of the spreading solvent effect on the interface. For higher volumes of spreading solvent, to avoid the drop fall it was necessary to perform a $10\ \mu\text{l}$ stabilization step before the final growing up to $20\ \mu\text{l}$. In all cases, the evaporation of the spreading solvent ensured that the nanoparticles had enough energy to adsorb at the interface, compared with the slow process of adsorption from the bulk.²⁵ In Fig. 2, it can be observed the surface tension evolution over time after the JP deposition at the water/air interface. The procedure followed is illustrated with a visual scheme.

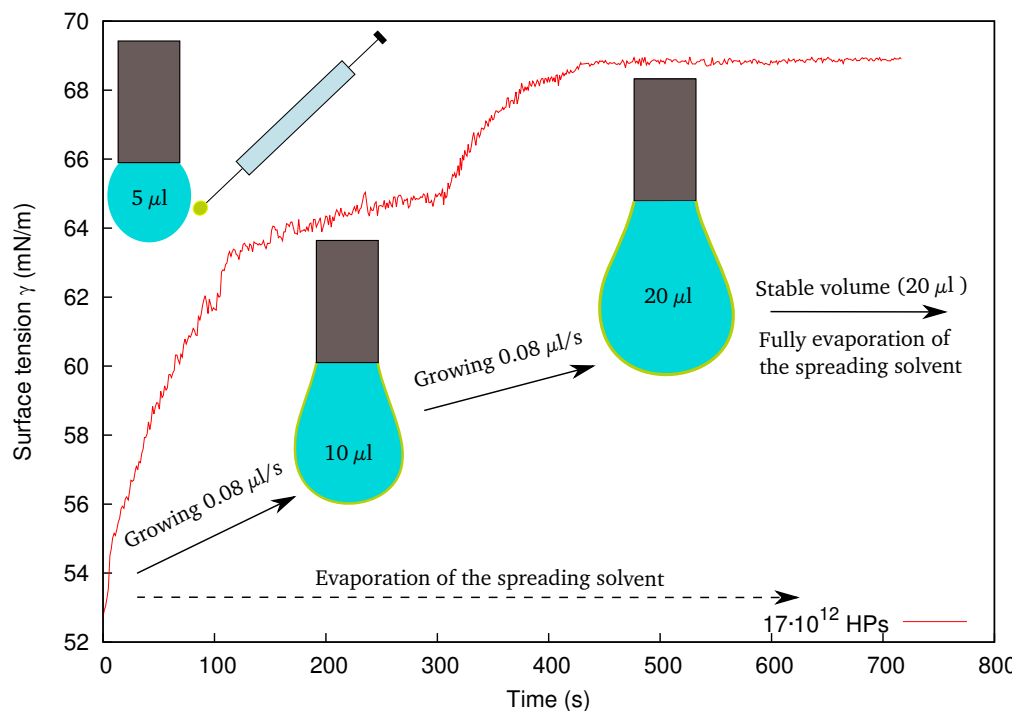


Figure 2: Surface tension evolution over time of a JPs deposition at the surface of a initial $5\ \mu\text{l}$ -MilliQ water pendant drop and subsequent growing up to $20\ \mu\text{l}$ at a $0.08\ \mu\text{l}/\text{s}$ rate. After the complete solvent evaporation, the surface tension remained stable.

The growing and shrinking pendant drop experiment was performed with slightly different protocols for water/air or water/decane interfaces. For both water/air and water/decane interfaces, the shrinking and growing volume rate was $0.08\ \mu\text{l}/\text{s}$ but the volume range was $20\ \mu\text{l} \leftrightarrow 10\ \mu\text{l}$ for water/air and $30\ \mu\text{l} \leftrightarrow 10\ \mu\text{l}$ for water/decane interfaces because the pendant drop was larger immersed in decane before the drop fall. Additionally, the volume was decreased up to $5\ \mu\text{l}$ prior to the immersion of the water pendant drop in decane to avoid the drop fall. For each particle concentration, the shrinking was repeated three times and the growing twice. The surface pressure $\Pi = \gamma_0 - \gamma$, where γ_0 is the surface tension of the phase without

nanoparticles and γ is the measured surface tension, is plotted against the area of the pendant drop divided by the number of deposited nanoparticles. A growing and shrinking pendant drop experiment is illustrated in Fig. 3.

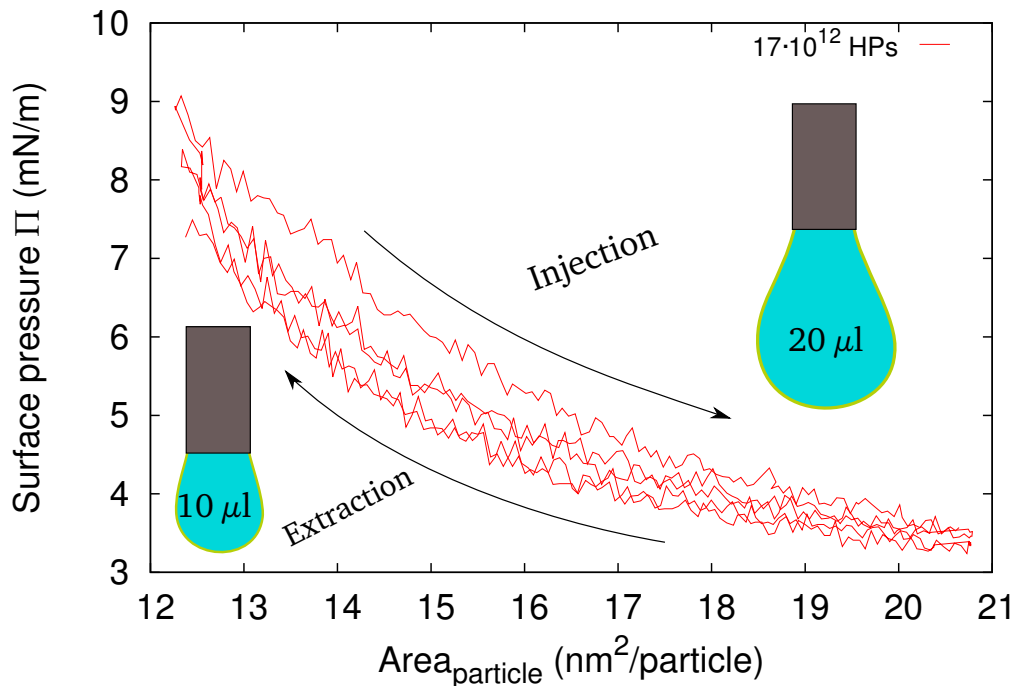


Figure 3: Surface pressure against area per particle for a growing and shrinking pendant drop experiment in water/decane interface. The pendant drop volume was changed between $30\mu l$ and $10\mu l$ at a $0.08\mu l/s$ rate. The growing was repeated three times and the shrinking twice. It is remarkable the reproducibility between growing and shrinking repetitions and the low hysteresis of the cycle.

Results and Discussion

The direct deposition of the JPs and HPs at the water/air interface produced a decrease of the surface tension once the spreading solvent was fully evaporated. The surface tension evolution over time for different amounts of HPs and JPs deposited at the drop surface is plotted in Fig. 4. The stable values of surface tension after the spreading solvent evaporation are compiled in Table 1. The surface tension decreased as the nanoparticle concentration increased. This decrease is greater for JPs than for HPs, suggesting enhanced interfacial activity of the JPs as compared to the HPs.³²

The Pickering emulsions become increasingly stabilized with increasing particle size. In this context,

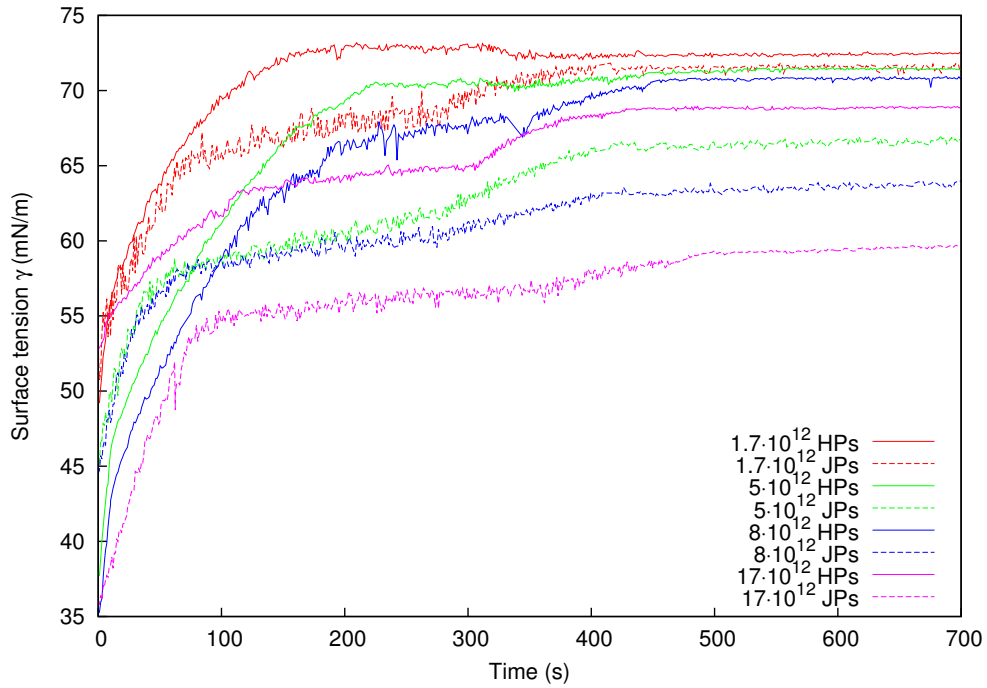


Figure 4: Surface tension evolution over time after deposition of HPs and JPs at the surface of a initial $5 \mu\text{l}$ MilliQ water pendant drop and subsequent growing up to $20 \mu\text{l}$ at a $0.08 \mu\text{l}/\text{s}$ rate. Each line corresponds to different depositions with different amounts of HPs and JPs, respectively. After the solvent evaporation, the surface tension remained stable.

Table 1: Stable surface tension after the spreading solvent evaporation for different number of deposited HPs and JPs.

Deposited particles	γ_{HP} (mN/m)	γ_{JP} (mN/m)
$1.7 \cdot 10^{12}$	72.40 ± 0.07	71.5 ± 0.3
$5 \cdot 10^{12}$	71.38 ± 0.11	66.7 ± 0.3
$8 \cdot 10^{12}$	70.78 ± 0.10	63.7 ± 0.3
$17 \cdot 10^{12}$	68.84 ± 0.06	59.50 ± 0.20

small nanoparticles (<100 nm) need to be tightly anchored at the interface to avoid desorption.² The adsorption energy at the interface is of the order of $k_B T$ when the nanoparticle diameter is in the range of a few nanometers.²³ Thus, the 3.5 nm-diameter HPs and JPs were expected to expel from the pendant drop interface due to thermal fluctuations or even by the drop shrinking.³³ Although the drop surface revealed visible aggregates and noticeable opacity as the nanoparticle concentration increased (see Fig. 5), both HPs and JPs exhibited a significant and stable effect on the surface tension after the THF evaporation. This suggests that a significant number of nanoparticles did not desorb from the drop interface over time. From molecular dynamics, Udayana-Ranatunga et al.³⁴ suggest that ligand rearrangement contributes significantly to the energetics of nanoparticles at interfaces.

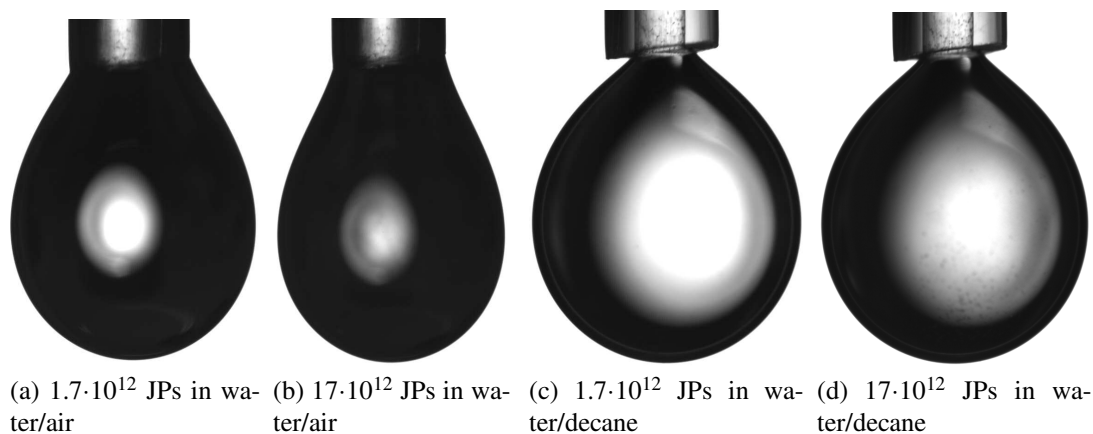


Figure 5: Images of pendant drops with different concentrations of JPs and at different interfaces. The pendant drop volumes were $20 \mu l$ and $30 \mu l$ for the water/air and water/decane interfaces, respectively.

Due to the experimental limitations in the drop area range reproduced with a single growing and shrinking experiment, several growing and shrinking experiments were performed for different number of deposited nanoparticles to probe a wider range of area per particle. Results for the growing and shrinking pendant drop experiments at water/air and water/decane interfaces are plotted in Fig. 6 for different concentrations of HPs and JPs. We averaged the different growing and shrinking cycles for each nanoparticle concentration due to the low hysteresis. It can be seen that the surface pressure increased as the area per particle decreased for both JPs and HPs. The interfacial activity reached similar values with both types of nanoparticles for the most expanded interfacial states (i.e. highest values of area per particle, $> 18 \text{ nm}^2/\text{particle}$). However, the interfacial activity was higher with the JPs than the HPs for the most com-

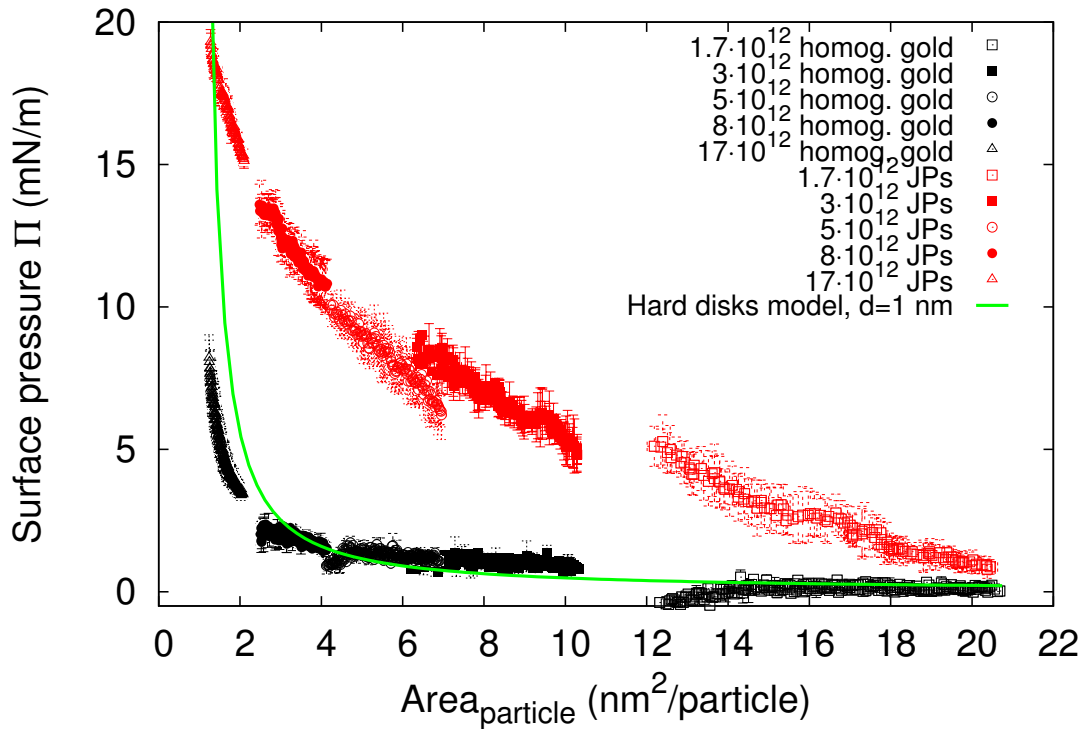
pressed states ($< 2 \text{ nm}^2/\text{particle}$) where the surface pressure was 2.5 times higher for the JPs than for the HPs at the water/air interface and 1.2 times at the water/decane interface. At both interfaces the JPs reached the same surface pressure: $(19.3 \pm 0.4) \text{ mN/m}$ upon the most compressed interface state. The higher interfacial activity of HPs at the water/decane interface for the most compressed state may reveal that the HPs move more freely in the presence of the decane phase because of its affinity with hydrophobic particles. This nanoparticle mobility allowed to realize arrangements with greater interfacial coverage and higher surface pressures.

Different models were explored to fit the experimental data with a hypothetical piecewise compression isotherm. A model based on the repulsion between charged particles³⁵ results in negligible surface pressures due to the low effective electric charge of HPs and JPs, provided its small size and effective charge. Moreover, the short chains of the hexanethiol and MEE capping ligands did not require a large polymer correction.²⁷ The simply scaled particle theory of hard disks model²⁶ is in reasonable agreement with the HP results for both water/air and water/decane interfaces, for hard disks with 1 nm diameter (see Fig. 6). In the hard-disk model, the surface pressure Π for a given area per particle at the interface $A_{particle}$ is written as follows:

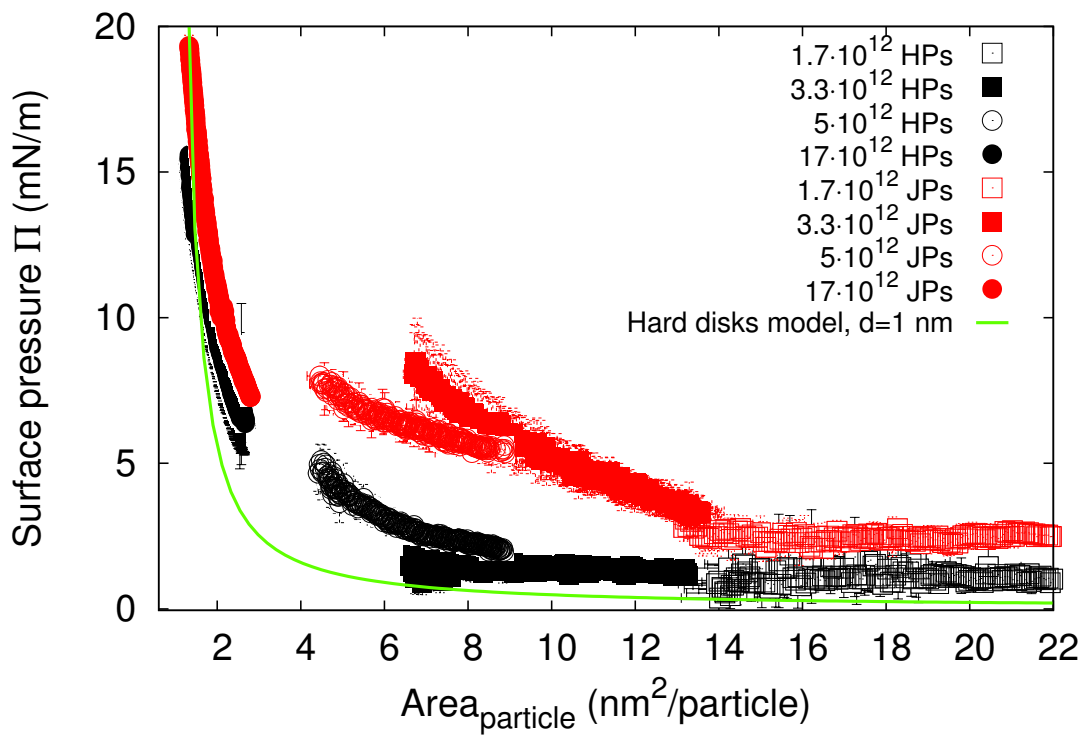
$$\Pi(A_{particle}) = \frac{k_B \cdot T}{A_{particle} \cdot \left(1 - \frac{\pi \cdot d^2}{4 \cdot A_{particle}}\right)^2} \quad (1)$$

where k_B is the Boltzmann constant, T is the temperature and d is the hard disk diameter. The hard disk model predicts no interactions when there is enough room for all nanoparticles at the interface and a significant effect on the surface tension at high concentrations when the nanoparticles are near close-packed. The fitted diameter of 1 nm points out that not all the nanoparticles were really adsorbed at the interface or that they were aggregated. In such situation, the number of particles at the interface was lower than expected and it is necessary to shrink further the pendant drop to reach the close-packed regime, resulting in a lower effective diameter of the hard disk model. This simple model underestimates the results of surface pressure against area per particle for the JPs. Further models taking into account the interaction between the Janus nanoparticles are needed to explain the results. Such models should incorporate the role of the wettability contrast between the two hemispheres of the JPs, provided the low effective charge and steric interactions between this nanoparticles.

Although there is evidence that not all nanoparticles are uniformly distributed at the pendant drop inter-



(a) Water/air interface



(b) Water/decane interface

Figure 6: Surface pressure against area per particle for different number of JPs (red dots) and HPs (black dots) deposited at the interface. Each black or red symbol corresponds to a single JP or HP deposition at the interface of the pendant drop. The solid line is the hard disks model (Eq. 1) for disks of 1 nm diameter.

face (visible aggregates in Fig. 5 and underestimated effective diameter for the HPs as discussed before), the nanoparticles placed at the interface seem to be well-anchored at both water/air and water/decane interfaces because the different growing and shrinking cycles for a given nanoparticle concentration show a very low hysteresis value, pointing out that the nanoparticles did not desorb from the interface as the drop area was changed. From these results, the JPs exhibited enhanced interfacial activity as compared to the HPs.

Conclusions

The interfacial activity of homogeneous 3.5 nm-gold nanoparticles capped with hexanethiol and Janus 3.5 nm-gold nanoparticles capped half with hexanethiol and half with MEE was explored using pendant drop tensiometry. The direct deposition of the nanoparticles in a spreading solvent at the interface of the pendant drop with a microsyringe rendered it possible to explore the surface tension evolution over time as the spreading solvent was evaporating at different nanoparticle concentrations. The direct deposition needed only a low quantity of nanoparticles in contrast to conventional adsorption of nanoparticles from the pendant drop bulk or a conventional Langmuir balance experiment. The growing and shrinking pendant drop technique allowed to study the surface pressure for a wide range of area per nanoparticle at the water/air and water/decane interfaces by varying the drop area and the number of nanoparticles deposited on the drop surface. For both interfaces studied, the homogeneous nanoparticles showed lower interfacial activity than the Janus nanoparticles. A hard disk model could fit the experimental results for the homogeneous particles, but it underestimated the interaction between the Janus nanoparticles at the interface.

Acknowledgement

This study was supported by the “Junta de Andalucía” (projects P09-FQM-4698 and P10-FQM-5977), the “Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad” (project MAT2011-23339) and by US National Science Foundation (DMR-0804049). Authors thank to Dr. J.A. Holgado-Terriza for the software Contacto[©] used for surface tension measurements.

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