Are Standard Solar Models Reliable?

John N. Bahcall
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

M. H. Pinsonneault
Department of Astronomy, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210

Sarbani Basu and J. Christensen-Dalsgaard
Theoretical Astrophysics Center, Danish National Research Foundation, and Institute for Physics and Astronomy, Aarhus University, DK 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

(Received 24 September 1996)

The sound speeds of solar models that include element diffusion agree with helioseismological measurements to a rms discrepancy of better than 0.2% throughout almost the entire Sun. Models that do not include diffusion, or in which the interior of the Sun is assumed to be significantly mixed, are effectively ruled out by helioseismology. Standard solar models predict the measured properties of the Sun more accurately than is required for applications involving solar neutrinos.

PACS numbers: 96.60.Jw, 26.65.+t

For almost three decades, a discrepancy has existed between solar model predictions of neutrino fluxes and the rates observed in terrestrial experiments. In recent years, the combined results from four solar neutrino experiments have sharpened the discrepancy in ways that are independent of details of the solar models [1]. This development is of broad interest since a modest extension of standard electroweak theory, in which neutrinos have small masses and lepton flavor is not conserved, leads to measurable discrepancies in the precisely measured properties of the solar core more tightly than earlier measurements.

In this Letter, we compare the solar sound speed $c$ inferred from the first year of data [14] with sound speeds computed from standard solar models used to predict solar neutrino fluxes and find a rms agreement better than 0.2% over essentially the entire Sun, with no adjustment of parameters. Since the deep solar interior behaves essentially as a fully ionized perfect gas, $c^2 \propto T/\mu$ where $T$ is temperature and $\mu$ is mean molecular weight; thus even tiny fractional errors in the model values of $T$ or $\mu$ would produce measurable discrepancies in the precisely determined helioseismological sound speed

$$\frac{\delta c}{c} \approx \frac{1}{2} \left( \frac{\delta T}{T} - \frac{\delta \mu}{\mu} \right). \quad (1)$$

This remarkable agreement between standard predictions and helioseismological observations rules out solar models with temperature or mean molecular weight profiles that differ significantly from standard profiles. The helioseismological data essentially rule out solar models in which deep mixing has occurred (cf. [15]) and argue against unmixed models in which the subtle effect of particle diffusion—selective sinking of heavier species in the Sun’s gravitational field—is not included.

Figure 1 compares the sound speeds computed from three different solar models with the values inferred [12,14] from the helioseismological measurements. The 1995 standard model of Bahcall and Pinsonneault (BP) [16], which includes helium and heavy element diffusion, is represented by the dotted line; the corresponding BP

\[0031-9007/97/78(2)/171(4)$10.00 © 1997 The American Physical Society]
The agreement between standard models and solar observations is independent of the finer details of the solar model. The standard model of Christensen-Dalsgaard et al. [20], which is derived from an independent computer code with different descriptions of the microphysics, predicts solar sound speeds that agree everywhere with the measured speeds to better than 0.2%.

Equation (1) and Fig. 1 imply that any changes $\delta T$ or $\delta \mu / \mu$ from the standard model values of temperature must be almost exactly canceled by changes $\delta \mu / \mu$ in mean molecular weight. In the standard model, $T$ and $\mu$ vary, respectively, by a factor of 53% and 43% over the entire range for which $c$ has been measured and by 1.9% and 39% over the energy producing region. It would be a remarkable coincidence if nature chose $T$ and $\mu$ profiles that individually differ markedly from the standard model but have the same ratio $T / \mu$. Thus we expect that the fractional differences between the solar and the model temperatures, $\delta T$ or mean molecular weights, $\delta \mu / \mu$, are of similar magnitude to $\delta c^2 / c^2$, i.e. (using the larger rms error, 0.002, for the solar interior)

$$|\delta T|, |\delta \mu / \mu| \lesssim 0.004.$$  

How significant for solar neutrino studies is the agreement between observation and prediction that is shown in Fig. 1? The calculated neutrino fluxes depend upon the central temperature of the solar model approximately as a power of the temperature, $\text{Flux} \propto T^n$, where for standard models the exponent $n$ varies from $n \sim -1.1$ for the $p-p$ neutrinos to $n \sim +24$ for the $^{8}$B neutrinos [23]. Similar temperature scalings are found for nonstandard solar models [24]. Thus maximum temperature differences of $\sim 0.2\%$ would produce changes in the different neutrino fluxes of several percent or less, much less than required [1] to ameliorate the solar neutrino problems.

Figure 2 shows that the “mixed” model of Cummings and Haxton (CH) [11] (illustrated in their Fig. 1) is grossly inconsistent with the observed helioseismological measurements. The vertical scale of Fig. 2 had to be expanded by a factor of 2.5 relative to Fig. 1 in order to display the large discrepancies with observations for the mixed model. The discrepancies for the CH mixed model (dashed line in Fig. 2) range from $+8\%$ to $-5\%$. Since $\mu$ in a standard solar model decreases monotonically outward from the solar interior, the mixed model—with
a constant value of $\mu$—predicts too large values for the sound speed in the inner mixed region and too small values in the outer mixed region. The asymmetric form of the discrepancies for the CH model is due to the competition between the assumed constant rescaling of the temperature in the BP no diffusion model and the assumed mixing of the solar core (constant value of $\mu$). We also show in Fig. 2 the relatively tiny discrepancies found for the new standard model, OPAL EOS.

More generally, helioseismology rules out all solar models with large amounts of interior mixing, unless finely tuned compensating changes in the temperature are made. The mean molecular weight in the standard solar model with diffusion varies monotonically from 0.86 in the deep interior to 0.62 at the outer region of nuclear fusion ($R = 0.25 R_\odot$) to 0.60 near the solar surface. Any mixing model will cause $\mu$ to be constant and equal to the average value in the mixed region. At the very least, the region in which nuclear fusion occurs must be mixed in order to affect significantly the calculated neutrino fluxes [3–7]. Unless almost precisely canceling temperature changes are assumed, solar models in which the nuclear burning region is mixed ($R \leq 0.25 R_\odot$) will give maximum differences $\delta c$ between the mixed and the standard model predictions, and hence between the mixed model predictions and the observations, of order

$$\frac{\delta c}{c} = \frac{1}{2} \left( \frac{\mu - \langle \mu \rangle}{\mu} \right) \sim 7\% \text{ to } 10\%,$$

which is inconsistent with Fig. 1.

Are the helioseismological measurements sensitive to the rates of the nuclear fusion reactions? In order to answer this question in its most extreme form, we have computed a model in which the cross section factor $S_{34}$ for the $^{3}\text{He}(\alpha, \gamma)^7\text{Be}$ reaction is artificially set equal to zero. The neutrino fluxes computed from this unrealistic model have been used [3] to set a lower limit on the allowed rate of solar neutrinos in the gallium experiments if the solar luminosity is currently powered by nuclear fusion reactions. Figure 2 shows that although the maximum discrepancies (~1%) for the $S_{34} = 0$ model are much smaller than for mixed models, they are still large compared to the differences between the standard model and helioseismological measurements. The mean squared discrepancy for the $S_{34} = 0$ model is 19 times larger than for the standard OPAL EOS model. We conclude that the $S_{34} = 0$ model is not compatible with helioseismological observations (see also Ref. [25]).

Some nuclear parameters are important for solar neutrino experiments but have negligible effects on the computed solar model values of the sound speed. For example, we computed a standard solar model in which we artificially decreased by a factor of 2 the crucial cross section factor $S_{17}$ for the rare $^7\text{Be}(p, \gamma)^8\text{B}$ reaction. The sound speeds computed for this radically different value of $S_{17}$ differ by less than 1 part in $10^4$ from the standard model values.

Finally, we comment on the effects of the recent improvements in opacity [17] and equation of state [18] on the predicted solar neutrino fluxes. Table I gives the neutrino fluxes computed for a series of three different standard solar models, all of which include helium and heavy element diffusion. The model labeled BP95 is from [16]; the models labeled new opac and OPAL EOS include, respectively, the improved opacities discussed in [17] and the improved opacities plus the new OPAL equation of state discussed in [18].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>$pp$</th>
<th>$pep$</th>
<th>$^7\text{Be}$</th>
<th>$^8\text{B}$</th>
<th>$^{13}\text{N}$</th>
<th>$^{15}\text{O}$</th>
<th>$^{17}\text{F}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BP95</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.515</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>6.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>New opac</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.516</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>6.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPAL EOS</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.514</td>
<td>6.60</td>
<td>0.062</td>
<td>0.054</td>
<td>6.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE I. Neutrino fluxes for solar models with diffusion. All fluxes, except for $^8\text{B}$ and $^{17}\text{F}$, are given in units of $10^{10}$ per cm$^{-2}$s$^{-1}$ at the earth’s surface. The $^8\text{B}$ and $^{17}\text{F}$ fluxes are in units of $10^{9}$ per cm$^{-2}$s$^{-1}$.  

FIG. 2. Nonstandard solar models compared with helioseismology. This figure is similar to Fig. 1 except that the vertical scale is expanded. The dashed curve represents the sound speeds computed for the mixed solar model of Cumming and Haxton [11] with $^4\text{He}$ mixing. The dotted line represents the sound speed for a solar model computed with the rate of the $^3\text{He}(\alpha, \gamma)^7\text{Be}$ reaction set equal to zero. For comparison, we also include the results for the new standard model labeled OPAL EOS in Fig. 1.
The neutrino fluxes computed with the improved opacity and equation of state differ from the previously published values [16] by amounts that are negligible in solar neutrino calculations. The predicted event rate, for all three models, is

$$\text{Cl Rate} = 9.5^{+1.2}_{-1.4} \text{ SNU}$$

for the chlorine experiment and

$$\text{Ga Rate} = 137^{+8}_{-5} \text{ SNU}$$

for the gallium experiments. The only noticeable change in the predicted event rates for the chlorine and the gallium experiment is a 2% larger event rate for chlorine, which is due to a small improvement [26] in the calculation of the neutrino absorption cross sections for $^8\text{B}$.

We conclude that the recent improvements in opacity and equation of state do not significantly affect the calculated neutrino fluxes, although they do result in sound speeds near the solar surface that are closer to the measured helioseismological values (see Fig. 1). The calculations of standard solar models lead to predicted sound speeds that agree closely with the measured helioseismological values. We cannot rule out with mathematical rigor the possibility [27] of constructing nonstandard models, consistent with quantum mechanics and with other stellar evolution observations, that are tuned to give the same sound speeds as the standard solar models. However, Ockham’s razor suggests a strong preference for standard solar models.

We thank P. Demarque for a subroutine that contains convenient code for the OPAL equation of state. This work was supported by NSF Grant No. PHY95-13835 and by the Danish National Research Foundation through the establishment of the Theoretical Astrophysics Center.


[18] F. J. Rogers, F. J. Swenson, and C. A. Iglesias, Astrophys. J. 456, 902 (1996). Our previous equation of state [16] assumed that the plasma was fully ionized in the interior and included the Debye-Huckel correction, relativistic effects, and degeneracy. The OPAL EOS is based on an activity expansion of the grand canonical partition function which does not require an ad hoc treatment of pressure ionization.


