Reverse Intersystem Crossing in Carbene-Metal-Amide TADF Emitters

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OLEDs function by recombining positive and negative charges which generate electronic excited states that relax by emitting light. Efficient emitters function via thermally activated delayed fluorescence (TADF), where the lowest triplet state $T_1$ in the emitter can undergo reverse intersystem crossing (rISC) to a highly fluorescent singlet state $S_1$. TADF is thermally allowed for small $T_1$-$S_1$ energy gaps as realized in donor-acceptor systems when both states are of charge-transfer (CT) character. The CT character however restricts the rISC efficiency through small $T_1$-$S_1$ spin-orbit coupling as well as the $S_1$ fluorescence rate. This dilemma inspired models involving intermediate states to rationalize the TADF mechanism.[1] A dynamical picture of the rISC, however, so far remained elusive.

We have now simulated[2] the rISC process of a carbene-copper-amide TADF emitter[3] using nonadiabatic dynamics based on vibronic coupling potentials.[4] We find rISC happening not around the global $T_1$ minimum, where the two ligands assume a co-planar coordination geometry, but around a higher-lying local $T_1$ minimum of perpendicular geometry. Efficient rISC is enabled by a higher-lying triplet metal-to-ligand charge transfer state. After rISC, the complex returns to a co-planar coordination geometry in the lowest-lying singlet state $S_1$ with efficient emission. The electronic cascade and the rotation of the metal-ligand bond shows the importance of the metal in TADF processes in carbene-copper-amides.

Figure: Basic/detailed TADF mechanism in the OLED emitter MAC-Cu-Cz.