SPECTRA OF DISTANT QUASARS AND VERIFICATION OF POSSIBLE VARIATION OF FUNDAMENTAL CONSTANTS OVER COSMOLOGICAL TIME-SCALES

D.A. VARSHALOVICH and A.Y. POTEKHIN

Department of Theoretical Astrophysics, A.F. Ioffe Institute of Physics and Technology, Politekhnicheskaya 26, St. Petersburg, 194021, Russia

Abstract. Constraints on possible variation rate of the fine-structure constant, $|\dot{\alpha}/\alpha| < 4 \times 10^{-14}$ yr$^{-1}$, and the electron-proton mass ratio $\mu = m_e/m_p$, $|\dot{\mu}/\mu| < 3 \times 10^{-13}$ yr$^{-1}$, over cosmological time scales are obtained from analyses of quasar spectroscopic data.

The problem of possible time variation of the fundamental physical constants was discussed by many authors (see below-cited papers for the references). An analysis of high-redshift quasar spectra makes it possible to check if the constants changed during $\sim 10^{10}$ yrs. Compared to previous works, we have performed more accurate analyses based on a more complete set of spectroscopic data, which enabled us to derive the most reliable upper limits on the possible time variation of the fine-structure constant $\alpha = e^2/\hbar c$ and the electron-proton mass ratio $\mu = m_e/m_p$.

The rate of the possible variation of $\alpha$ is estimated from a statistical analysis of the relative fine splitting $\delta \lambda/\lambda$ of 1414 pairs of doublet absorption wavelengths of alkalike ions in quasar spectra at redshifts $z = 0.2 - 3.7$, compiled from data published in 1980–1992. If $\alpha$ were $z$-dependent, then the ratio $(\delta \lambda_1/\lambda_1)/(\delta \lambda_0/\lambda_0) = (\alpha_z/\alpha_0)^2$ would vary with $z$. However our analysis (Potehin and Varshalovich 1993) revealed no statistically significant variation. The estimate of the variation rate reads

$$\alpha^{-1} d\alpha/dz = (0.6 \pm 2.8) \times 10^{-4}. \quad (1)$$

At 95% significance level, an upper bound on this rate $|\alpha^{-1} d\alpha/dz| < 5.6 \times 10^{-4}$ is imposed. In the standard cosmological model with parameters $H_0 = 75$ km s$^{-1}$ Mpc$^{-1}$, $q_0 = 1/3$ ($\Omega = 1$) and $\Lambda_0 = 0$ this corresponds to the restriction $|\dot{\alpha}/\alpha| < 4 \times 10^{-14}$ yr$^{-1}$.

The rate of the possible variation of $\mu$ is estimated from a comparison of wavelengths $\lambda$ for different electron-vibro-rotational lines of molecular hydrogen H$_2$ at $z = 2.811$ in the spectrum of quasar PKS 0528 – 250. If $\mu$ were $z$-dependent, then the ratio $(\lambda_1/\lambda_2)/(\lambda_1/\lambda_2)_0 \approx 1 + K_{ik}(\Delta \mu/\mu)$ would deviate from unity. However our analysis (Varshalovich and Levshakov 1993) revealed no statistically significant deviation. The estimate of the variation is

$$(\Delta \mu/\mu)_{z=2.811} = (1 \pm 2) \times 10^{-3}. \quad (2)$$

361

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The 95\%-significance upper bound on the variation rate is $|\mu^{-1}d\mu/dz| < 1.8 \times 10^{-3}$. In the standard cosmological model with the above-mentioned parameters this corresponds to the restriction $|\dot{\mu}/\mu| < 3 \times 10^{-13}$ yr\(^{-1}\).

References