



Publication Year	2018
Acceptance in OA	2021-01-27T15:09:39Z
Title	Search of CH ₄ on Mars using EXES aboard SOFIA
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Handle	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12386/30046

Search of CH₄ on Mars using EXES aboard SOFIA

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Abstract: We present the results of our sensitive search of CH₄ on Mars using the Echelon-Cross-Echelle Spectrograph (EXES) onboard the Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA).

Discovery of CH₄ in the Martian atmosphere has led to much discussion since it could be a signature of recent biological/geological activities on Mars [1,2,3]. However, the presence of CH₄ and its temporal and spatial variations (0-60 ppb) are under discussion because of the large uncertainties embedded in the previous remote-sensing observations [4]. Although Tunable Laser Spectrometer onboard Curiosity rover detected CH₄ signal and showed strong variability of the amount (0-9 ppb), sensitive remote-sensing observations are still important to search for the source since TLS can measure CH₄ variation only at Gale crater.

SOFIA/EXES has unique capabilities to perform a sensitive search for CH₄ from Earth. The high altitude of SOFIA (~12-14 km) enables us to significantly reduce the effects of terrestrial atmosphere. Thanks to this, it improves the chance to detect Martian CH₄ lines because it reduces the impact of telluric CH₄ on Martian CH₄, and allows us to use CH₄ lines in the 7.5 μm band which have less contamination.

We performed sensitive measurements of Martian CH₄ by using SOFIA/EXES on 16 March 2016 and 25 January 2017, which corresponds to summer (Ls = 123.2°) and winter (Ls = 305.2°) in the northern hemisphere on Mars (see Table 1). We selected the 1325-1340 cm⁻¹ (7.45 - 7.55 μm) interval considering the availability of multiple strong CH₄ lines, and used the high-spectral resolution mode (R~90,000) to improve the possibility of detecting the narrow Martian CH₄ lines. We observed the planet at three separate slit positions (center, right, and left of the Martian disk with an offset of 2.5") on 16 March 2016, and two positions (right and left of the Martian disk with an offset of 1") on 25 January 2017. The narrowest slit-width (1.44") was used to maximize the spectral resolving power that provided an instrumental resolving power of 90,000.

We first performed the data analysis on 16 March 2016 [6]. We confined our analysis to three CH₄ lines at 1327.074219, 1327.409783 and 1332.546743 cm⁻¹ because they have no contamination from other lines (i.e., terrestrial CH₄ and H₂O, and Martian CO₂ and H₂O lines) and stronger intensities than the other CH₄ lines. Table 2 summarizes the retrieved CH₄ volume mixing ratios (the weighted averages using the ones retrieved from three CH₄ lines independently), and the corresponding locations (latitude and longitude) and local times. As shown in this Table, there are no definitive detections of CH₄. The Martian disk was spatially resolved into 3 x 3 areas, and the upper limits on the CH₄ volume mixing ratio range from 1 to 9 ppb, which are more stringent than those by the previous remote-sensing observations. We also have performed the analysis of the data taken on 25 January 2017 [7]. Table 3 shows the results. As shown in this table, we do not detect CH₄ from the data taken on 25 January 2017. The upper limits are slightly higher (7-14 ppb) than those on 16 March 2016 because of shorter integration time, lower flying altitude of SOFIA, and smaller Doppler Shift between Mars and Earth.

Non-detection of CH₄ could be due to its strong temporal variation, similar to that measured by Curiosity/TLS over Gale crater, or to localized spatial distribution. Our results emphasize that release of CH₄ on Mars is sporadic and/or localized if the process is present. We will continue to perform the sensitive search of CH₄ on Mars by EXES in April and October 2018.

Table 1: Overview of the EXES observations.

Observation Date (UT)	16 March 2016	25 Jan. 2017
Observation Time	9:59-10:32	1:40-2:11
Martian Year	33	33
Doppler shift (km/s)	-16.2	11.7
Diameter of Mars (")	10.0	5.2
Aircraft Altitude (km)	13.7	11.9
Sub Earth Lon (°W)	247-253	347-353
Spectral range (cm ⁻¹)	1326.57-1338.66	1325.87-1337.96

Table 2: CH₄ volume mixing ratio (VMR) on Mars retrieved from the SOFIA/EXES observation carried on 16 March 2016 ($L_s = 123.2^\circ$) [6]. The Martian disk was spatially resolved into 3 x 3 areas, and the upper limits on the CH₄ volume mixing ratio range from 1 to 6 ppb. Note that EXES spectra were spatially binned over ~ 2.7 arcsec, which corresponds to a latitudinal/longitudinal resolution of about $\pm 27^\circ$ at the sub-Earth point.

Slit position	Lat (°)	Lon (°W)	LT	CH ₄ VMR (ppb 3 σ)
Mars Center #1	-17	181	16	2 \pm 3
Mars Center #1	13	211	14	1 \pm 1
Mars Center #1	40	247	12	1 \pm 2
Mars Left	-42	205	15	1 \pm 5
Mars Left	-8	237	13	0 \pm 3
Mars Left	13	270	11	1 \pm 2
Mars Right	0	168	18	3 \pm 6
Mars Right	30	189	16	0 \pm 2
Mars Right	66	218	14	0 \pm 1
Mars Center #2	-17	188	16	1 \pm 4
Mars Center #2	13	217	14	0 \pm 1
Mars Center #2	40	253	12	0 \pm 2

Table 3: CH₄ volume mixing ratio (VMR) on Mars retrieved from the SOFIA/EXES observation carried on 25 January 2017 ($L_s = 305.2^\circ$). The Martian disk was spatially resolved into 2 x 2 areas, and the upper limits on the CH₄ volume mixing ratio range from 7 to 13 ppb. Note that EXES spectra were spatially binned over ~ 2.5 arcsec, which corresponds to a latitudinal/longitudinal resolution of about $\pm 43^\circ$ at the sub-Earth point.

Slit position	Lat (°)	Lon (°W)	LT	CH ₄ VMR (ppb 3 σ)
Mars Left	-3	327	11	0 \pm 7
Mars Left	-67	336	10	2 \pm 8
Mars Right	4	19	8	1 \pm 11
Mars Right	39	54	5	0 \pm 13

Acknowledgements: This work has been supported by the FNRS "CRAMIC" project under grant agreement n° T.0171.16. This work is based on observations made with the NASA/DLR Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA). SOFIA is jointly operated by the Universities Space Research Association, Inc. (USRA), under NASA contract NAS2-97001, and the Deutsches SOFIA Institut (DSI) under DLR contract 50 OK 0901 to the University of Stuttgart. MJR, CD, and MC of the EXES team are supported by NASA award NNX13AI85A.

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