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Development and application of 3-D interferometer for analysis of the concentration field in protein crystal growth

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When the crystal is growing in a supersaturating solution, the solute concentration is decreasing towards the crystal/ solution interface because the crystal consumes solute in the solution as it grows. Due to this large vertical concentration gradient, buoyancy driven solutal convection develops. As a result, the distribution of concentration around the crystal become complicated compared to the case when there is no convection.

Thus, not only concentration gradient but also the flow and convection of the solution influences the state of the crystal surface. So that visualizing the whole concentration field of a crystal interface including convection is required.

There have been many reports concerning the measurement of the concentration field, but many of them were two-dimensional (2-D) observations, namely, the objects were observed only from one direction. The information obtained by the 2-D observations is integrated in average along the direction of the observation, so the local information, e.g., concentration distribution around the crystal-liquid interface, was not obtained.

To improve the disadvantage on the 2-D observation, a method of computer tomography (CT) has been adopted in this study. By using the CT method, we can reconstruct the information of the three-dimensional (3-D) concentration field around the growing crystal based on 2-D observations obtained from several directions (3-D observation).

In this study, 3-D measurement of the concentration field with convection and without convection around inorganic and protein crystals was carried out to reveal the concentration distribution over the crystal surfaces. Normal growth rate of the face from points to points are also measured to discuss the effect of concentration distribution on the surface.

Keywords: interferometer, lysozyme, convection