

First Evidence of DIB Carriers in the Circumstellar Shell of a Carbon Star

T. LE BERTRE, ESO

The origin of the diffuse interstellar bands (DIBs) represents one of the longest standing unsolved problems in astronomy. Although it is well established that they originate in the interstellar medium, no convincing identification of the responsible agent(s) has yet been made. They could be produced by large molecules, e.g. the fashionable polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), or by atoms adsorbed on interstellar grains. A search for DIB features in stars with circumstellar dust shells (CDSs), carried out twenty years ago, was unsuccessful. It was therefore inferred that the DIB agents are not present in the circumstellar environments of late-type stars. Since then sky surveys have been made in the infrared range and have revealed the existence of numerous red long-period variables, very often enshrouded inside dense CDSs; most of these objects are *miras* evolving through the asymptotic giant branch (AGB). There is growing evidence that these sources are among the main contributors to the replenishment of the interstellar medium. In these conditions, the absence of DIBs in the spectra of late-type stars appears puzzling. With the new instruments and better detectors available today, it seems worth to readdress observationally this problem.

However, the search for DIB features in late-type star spectra is difficult: one should extract features with probably small equivalent widths against a complex background of blended lines coming from the star. An ideal case one would dream of would be that of a binary system made of an early-type star close to a late-type star either inside its CDS or on the other side of it with respect to us. In such a case, one would be able to probe the circumstellar environment by its absorption effects on the early-type spectrum. The companion should be bright enough in order to allow acquisition of spectra with a good signal to noise ratio. In practice, this means that white dwarfs are excluded; therefore, if the two objects are physically associated, the companion should be less evolved which means that it can be neither a supergiant nor a star earlier than B2. The line of sight to the companion should pass very near the late-type star in order that the extinction is significant, but not too much if one wants to get the spectrum of the companion separately. Practically, with the

present instrumentation, it means a distance between 1 and 2–3" for *miras* up to ~2 kpc.

It does not seem that a systematic search for such cases has ever been done. It is difficult to estimate their probability of occurrence as it depends on many factors, related to the formation and evolution of binary systems, which are still not well known. However, we can suspect that it is not too small since, serendipitously, one such case was found. In a detailed presentation of observations obtained on CS776 [1], it is shown that this carbon star has a companion of type A3. The companion is physically associated to CS776 and at a distance of slightly less than 2"; it is significantly reddened ($A_B \sim 2$). A kinematic distance of 1.3 kpc can be deduced from 2.6 mm CO observations; the projected separation of the companion and the carbon star is therefore ~2000 AU. From the mapping of interstellar extinction around CS776, it appears that there is no significant intervening material; therefore, the reddening of the companion should be due to the circumstellar material lost by CS776.

The companion of CS776 was observed in April 1989 at the ESO 1.5-m telescope equipped with its recently improved spectrograph [2]. A slit-width of 1.5" was used; the detector was an RCA CCD (ESO No. 13) with pixel size 15 μm . The companion spectrum could be registered separately from the one of CS776 thanks to the combination of good seeing conditions (<1") and excellent optical quality of the refurbished telescope and instrument. For comparison, a bright unreddened star of spectrum A3 was also observed. A division of the object spectrum by the unreddened star spectrum allows the cancel-

lation of the stellar features and an easy search for features due to agents in the CS776 circumstellar shell. Also, care was taken to observe both objects at same airmass for cancelling effectively

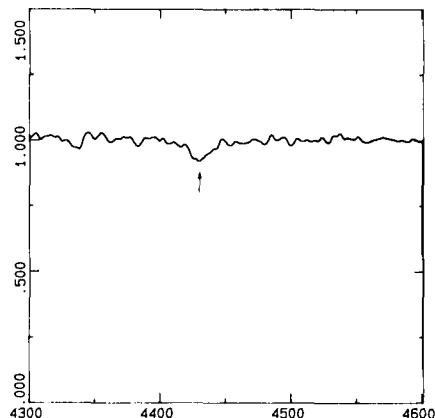


Figure 1: 4300–4600 Å spectrum obtained in April 1989 at the ESO 1.5-m telescope; spectral resolution is ≈ 7 Å (FWHM). The position of the feature at 4430 Å is marked.

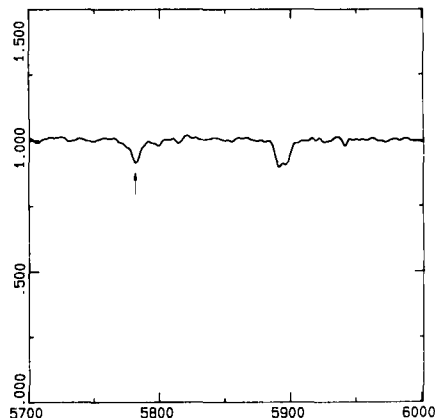


Figure 2: 5700–6000 Å spectrum; the position of the feature at 5780 Å is marked. The sodium doublet at 5890 Å is almost resolved.

EDITORIAL NOTE

“Discovery of a Low Mass B[e] Supergiant in the SMC” by M. Heydari-Malayeri, ESO (*The Messenger* 58, 37)

Due to a most regrettable incident, a manuscript by Dr. M. Heydari-Malayeri, ESO, La Silla, prepared for the European journal *Astronomy & Astrophysics*, was published in the December 1989 issue of the *Messenger*. The error occurred as a result of a highly unlikely string of individual events during the editorial process. Although publication in our journal automatically excludes publication of the same manuscript in *Astronomy & Astrophysics*, we have been pleased to learn that the editors of *Astronomy & Astrophysics* have decided to make an exception in this particular case and to publish Dr. Heydari-Malayeri's article (with a few, minor changes) in one of the forthcoming issues of that journal. I have expressed my sincere apologies to all involved and immediately taken the steps necessary to avoid such mistakes in the future.

R. M. West, *Messenger* editor