AFM/LFM surface studies of a ternary polymer blend cast on substrates covered by a self-assembled monolayer

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Abstract

Nanometer films composed of model ternary blend of deuterated polystyrene (dPS), poly(2-vinylpyridine) (PVP) and poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA) were studied after spin-coating from a common solvent. Surface undulations and the distribution of phase-separated domains at the surface and in the bulk are closely related as revealed by atomic (AFM) and lateral (LFM) force microscopy. For the first time the chemical sensitivity of LFM is demonstrated for a ternary polymer mixture. In this case PMMA intercalates between dPS and PVP leading to extended interfaces and surface patterns with two dominant lengthscales (~1μm and ~100 nm). Both of these lengthscales as well as the film thickness increase linearly with total polymer concentration in the solvent. Phase separation on two length scales is concluded. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Surface phase transitions [1] and thermodynamics [2] of thin polymer blend films are of utmost current interest. In many practical applications films of incompatible mixtures are prepared by spin-coating from a common solvent. Phase separation enabled by the solvent added to the polymers (i.e. by a 'solvent quench' into non-stable region of the phase diagram) is rapidly terminated as the solvent evaporates [3–10]. Formed non-equilibrium phase domain structures, accompanied by the undulations at the film surface, are either undesirable or intended (e.g. as in antireflection coatings [6]). Phase separation due to solvent quench has been studied almost exclusively for binary polymer blends [3,5–10]. Important modification of this process was noticed when the third polymer component (surfactant) was added and segregated at the interfaces between the other phases [4]. In this case, as the surfactant reduces the interfacial energy, extended interfaces are formed.

Recently, we have described surface patterns, related with topography and phase morphology, formed in blend films of deuterated polystyrene (dPS) and poly(2-vinylpyridine) (PVP) cast on a substrate modified by hydrophobic self-assembled monolayers (SAM) [5]. Here, our study is extended to a model ternary blend of dPS, PVP and poly-(methyl methacrylate) PMMA [4]. We analyze films with the surface patterns characterized by two well defined length scales where double phase separation is expected [3,11]. We examine
quantitatively how the characteristic dimensions of phase domains are controlled by the total polymer concentration $c_P$ in a common solvent. We inspect also the relation between surface and bulk phase structure as a function of $c_P$.

2. Experimental

The polymers used in this work were dPS (molecular weight $M_w = 174$ k, polydisperisty index $M_w/M_n = 1.03$), PVP ($M_w = 115$ k, $M_w/M_n = 1.02$) and PMMA ($M_w = 149$ k, $M_w/M_n = 1.10$), purchased from Polymer Standards Service. Nanometer films (with average thickness $h \sim 30–90$ nm) of ternary blend dPS/PMMA/PVP (with relative weight fractions 2:1:2) were spin-coated at 5800 rpm from tetrahydrofurane (THF) solution with total polymer concentration $c_P = 6–18$ mg/ml onto hydrophobic SAM of hexadecanethiol (HS(CH$_2$)$_{15}$CH$_3$) formed on Au-covered silicon wafers[5]. Topography and friction images of the cast thin films were collected simultaneously by atomic (AFM)– and lateral (LFM)–force modes of CP Park Scientific Instruments microscope working in contact mode with a Si$_3$N$_4$ cantilevered tip and a typical load of 20 nN. The overall phase domain morphology was determined by AFM examination combined with selective dissolution of PVP- (Fig. 2C) and dPS- (Fig. 2D) rich phases. Finally, film thickness was evaluated from the AFM images of the region with polymer film and bare substrate as represented in Fig. 3A and C for the $c_P = 9$ mg/ml sample.

3. Results

Three types of data sets were collected in order to probe different characteristics of the blend films. First, topographic and friction surface images were acquired for blends cast with increasing polymer concentration $c_P$. They are shown in Figs. 1A–B, 1C–D, 1E–F and 2A–B for $c_P = 6, 7, 9$ and 18 mg/ml, respectively. Second, the overall phase domain morphology was revealed by AFM images (depicted here for $c_P = 18$ mg/ml) taken for the films as prepared (Fig. 2A) and after subsequent selective dissolution of PVP- (Fig. 2C) and dPS- (Fig. 2D) rich phases. An inspection of AFM images (Figs. 1A, C and E and 2A) and related histograms (not shown here) reveals bimodal height distribution and enables us to determine two characteristic topographic levels and average height value. The average film thickness $h = \Delta h_F + \Delta h_S$ was evaluated as the sum of two components. First component $\Delta h_F$ (marked on Fig. 3E) is defined as the difference between the average height and the lower topographic level of the blend film. The second component $\Delta h_S$ is measured directly from topographic cross-section taken on the polymer film edge (Fig. 3C) and corresponds to the difference between the lower topographic level of the blend film and the level of the substrate. In this manner the average film thickness was evaluated for blends cast with various polymer concentration $c_P$. The relation $h(c_P)$, depicted in Fig. 4A, follows linear relation predicted[12] and observed[13] for spin-coated films of pure polymers. This observation indicates that all complex spin-coating mechanisms (such as centrifugal and viscous forces, polymer diffusion and solvent evaporation[12]) are similar in both cases. It suggests also that surface undulations (characteristic for blend films) are formed during the final stage of spin-coating process when film thickness is modified predominantly by rapid solvent evaporation[7].

4. Discussion

As shown in Figs. 1A, C, E and 2A, film surface undulations form well developed pattern with two dominant length scales $d_L$ and $d_S$: large coarse, essentially elongated elevations ($d_L$) and much smaller circular protrusions ($d_S$). Both structures coarsen for increased polymer concentration $c_P$. To examine this phenomenon more quantitatively we have analyzed AFM images numerically using approach proposed in Refs. [3,5,14]. In this approach $d_L$ can be defined by the wave vector
\[ k_{\text{max}} = 1/d_L, \] where \( k_{\text{max}} \) corresponds to maximum of radial averaged power spectrum of fast Fourier transform calculated for (not presented—80 \times 80 \ \mu\text{m}^2) \) AFM images. Parameter \( d_S \) is given (\( S_S = \pi d_S^2 \)) by mean area \( S_S \) of small circular protrusions determined by integral geometry methods. Determined dependence of \( d_L \) and \( d_S \) on polymer concentration \( c_P \), shown in Fig. 4B and C, follows a linear relation.

The potential of LFM measurements for the chemical imaging of organic films (SAM monolayers [15], polymer blends [8,9]) has been recognized a few years ago. Here we present first successful application of LFM to determine the
distribution of surface phase domains in ternary blend films. An inspection of LFM images (Figs. 1B, D, F and 2B) reveals three levels of the lateral force for the blend films (see also LFM cross-sections in Fig. 3D and F). For organic films with similar elastic modulus main contribution to the friction comes from adhesive force between the tip and the studied film region characterized by surface tension $\gamma$ [8,9,15]. Since for a polar (Si$_3$N$_4$) tip LFM signal increases with $\gamma$ [8,9,15] and $\gamma$(dPS) < $\gamma$(PMMA) [10] < $\gamma$(PVP) [16], we attribute successive LFM signal levels (Fig. 3D and F) to dPS, PMMA and PVP. Accordingly white, gray and black color on LFM images (Figs. 1 and 2) correspond to dPS, PMMA and PVP.

Now we are ready to discuss surface phase domain morphology and its relation with surface topography. We start by noting that (white) dPS- and (black) PVP-rich surface regions of LFM images (Figs. 1B, D, F and 2B) are always separated by PMMA (gray) inclusions. Such behavior reflects the surfactant role played by PMMA which is driven by the balance of three enthalpic interaction parameters (with $Z_{\text{dPS/PVP}} > Z_{\text{PMMA/dPS}}$, $Z_{\text{PMMA/PVP}}$ [4]). The comparison of AFM and LFM images (Figs. 1 and 2A, B) reveals also that the elevated film regions correspond to domains rich in PVP and PMMA, while the lower part of the film is composed with dPS-rich phase (cf. Fig. 3C, E and D, F). Such behavior was explained earlier [4] by different rates of solvent evaporation from various polymers. Briefly, PVP and PMMA solidify earlier than dPS which, as a better dissolved polymer, is depleted of the solvent later and, therefore, collapses below the level of the other phase domains.

Careful analysis of friction images reveals that at low polymer concentration $c_p$ the surface phase rich in PMMA (gray) was located mainly at the edges of large coarse elevations (Fig. 1B and D).
Withincreasing $c_P$ this phase progressively covers inner regions of the elevations (Figs. 1F and 2B) which were earlier occupied almost exclusively by the PVP-rich phase (black). To investigate the correspondence between these and other surface and bulk features of the phase domain morphology, we compare now LFM data (Fig. 2B) with AFM results obtained prior (Fig. 2A) and after subsequent selective dissolution of PVP (Fig. 2C) and dPS (Fig. 2D). This comparison (performed for the $c_P = 18$ mg/ml sample) confirms the concluded earlier relation between LFM signal level and various surface phases. It shows also that the coverage of the inner regions of large coarse elevations by PMMA-rich phase is merely a surface effect.

5. Summary and conclusions

The domains of ternary blend dPS/PMMA/PVP films, phase-separated in the course of spin-coating from a common solvent, form quasi-two-dimensional structures with dPS- and PVP-rich domains separated by PMMA inclusions. In addition, for increasing total polymer concentration $c_P$, the PVP-rich bulk domains are observed to become progressively covered by surface layers rich in PMMA. Surface topography and phase domain morphology are closely related. Lower surface regions correspond to dPS-rich domains while elevated areas to phases rich in PVP and PMMA. Topographic structures with two dominant length scales ($d_L \sim 1 \mu m$, $d_S \sim 100$ nm) are
formed. Both $d_L$ and $d_S$ as well as average film thickness $h$ of the blend film grows linearly with $c_P$.

Our results indicate that observed two types of topographic structures correspond to bimodal distribution of phase domains and originate from phase separation on two length scales (not observed in the absence of surfactant blend component (PMMA) for analogous blend PVP/dPS [5]). Most probably the large-scale formation of domain structure (with phase compositions far from equilibrium values) is driven by fast hydrodynamic process [11]. Smaller circular domains are formed most likely due to secondary phase separation [11] in macroscopically separated dPS-rich domains, where solvent is depleted later and polymers are mobile longer. Observed relation between average film thickness (controlled by $c_P$) and the length scales of both domain structures can be explained assuming that in thicker films the solvent is present longer, allowing for a longer period of polymer mobility and, hence, higher degree of phase domain coarsening during the spin-coating process [7].

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References