Séminaire Chimie ED459 – Mardi 24 janvier 2023 à 11h
CNRS amphithéâtre de la Délégation Régionale, Montpellier

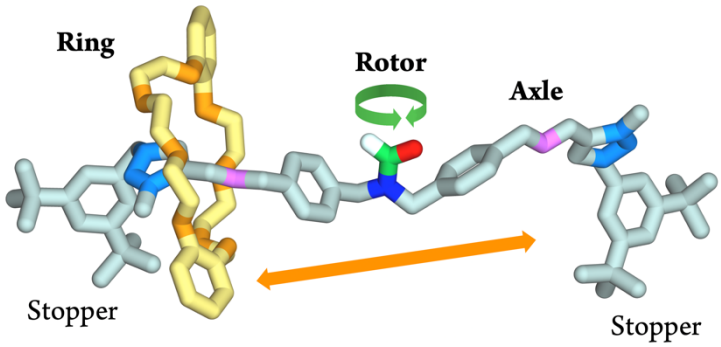
Playing with molecular rings and strings: new directions for nanoscale switches, machines and motors

Professor **Alberto Credi**

Center for Light Activated Nanostructures (CLAN), Dipartimento di Chimica Industriale "Toso Montanari", Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna, and Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Bologna, Italy. E-mail: alberto.credi@unibo.it

The construction of molecular scale devices and machines have formidably stimulated the creativity of chemists in the past three decades.[1,2] The interest on this kind of systems arises from their ability to perform a (useful) function in response to chemical and/or physical signals (e.g., light). Mechanically interlocked molecules exhibit appealing structural and functional properties for the construction of nanoscale devices and machines; molecular shuttles based on rotaxanes constitute common examples.[2]

Here I will describe investigations undertaken in our laboratories, aimed at inducing and controlling nanoscale movements in rotaxanes and related species to perform functions such as transmitting motion between sites[3] (see Figure) and activating mechanically chiral structures for enantioselective guest recognition.[4] From a fundamental viewpoint these systems behave as molecular switches under thermodynamic control. Appropriately designed architectures, however, can exploit an energy harvesting process to operate away from thermodynamic equilibrium.[5] Moreover, by exploiting energy and/or information ratcheting effects, directional and autonomous movement of the molecular components can occur.[1,2] We have combined this strategy with a minimalist chemical design to realize artificial nanoscale pumps powered by light[6] and electricity.[7] Besides their interest for fundamental science, these systems have the potential to bring about radical innovation in catalysis, materials science, energy conversion, robotics and medicine.[8]



Acknowledgements

Support from the European Union (H2020 ERC AdG 'Leaps' 692981, FET-OPEN 'Magnify' 801378, ITN 'ArtMoMa' 860434) and the Ministero dell'Università e Ricerca (Grants 20173L7W8K and R16S9XXKX3) is gratefully acknowledged.

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