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Hydrogen Photochromism in Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders

Lei Pan,$^a$ Yi Wang,$^a$ Xian Jie Wang,$^b$ HuiYing Qu,$^c$ JiuPeng Zhao,$^c$ Yao Li$^a$$^*$ and Alexander Gavrilyuk$^a$$^d$

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In this paper, we report on the hydrogen photochromism of Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders with different structures. Four different powder phases were prepared by calcining Nb$_2$O$_5$·nH$_2$O powders at various temperatures, and their morphology, structure, and electronic band structure were characterized by scanning electron microscopy, structural analyses, thermogravimetric analysis, differential scanning calorimetry, and optical spectroscopy. Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders with different structures and very different properties were formed after different high-temperature treatments of the polymorphous oxide. A pronounced photochromic effect was observed in the M and H phases of Nb$_2$O$_5$, whereas the other phases exhibited poor photochromic responses. Because the photochromism arises due to the detachment of hydrogen atoms under the action of light from hydrogen donor molecules previously adsorbed on the oxide surface, the electron band structure and the morphology have strong influences on the photochromic properties of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders. For these reasons, the pronounced photochromic effect was achieved in the H phase.

Introduction

Although photochromism in transition metal oxides (TMOs), to the best of our knowledge, was reported first for ZnO in the 19th century,$^1$ systematic and continuous investigations were only launched in the 1960s, when the photochromic TMOs started to attract attention for promising applications in many fields.$^2$ For example, potential applications include the production,$^3$ storage, and transport of hydrogen as a fuel, dopant, or catalyst for hydrogen energetics, biology, or medical applications, among many other possible applications in science and technology. WO$_3$ and MoO$_3$ are being studied especially intensively.$^4$$^5$ Some other TMOs such as V$_2$O$_5$$^1$$^1$ and TiO$_2$$^1$$^2$ were also reported to have photochromic properties. The results of the continuous research made it possible to forward several theoretical models for understanding the nature of the photochromism in TMOs.$^1$$^1$,$^6$$^1$,$^13$$^1$-16$^1$ The influences of various factors such as the preparation method,$^1$$^7$$^1$-20$^1$ crystal structure,$^1$$^8$$^1$,$^19$$^1$,21$^1$ temperature,$^1$$^6$ morphology,$^1$$^8$ and electronic band structure$^1$$^20$ on the photochromic behavior were also investigated in detail.$^1$

It should be stressed that the photochromism of TMOs is very special in that it is due to detachment of hydrogen atoms from organic molecules previously adsorbed on the oxide surface under the action of light. These hydrogen atoms donate electrons to the oxides to form lower-valence cations, whereas the detached protons are localized in the vicinity of the oxygen anions.$^1$ The mechanism for the photoinjection of hydrogen that yields the photochromism was described in detail elsewhere$^14$$^1$,21$^1$ and determined as proton-coupled electron transfer. In fact, the photoinjection of hydrogen is a form of doping of the electron-proton plasma, which yields radical changes in the oxide parameters. In addition, the hydrogen photochromism may be a useful tool for investigations of hydrogen processes in the oxides.

In the hydrogen photoinjection process, the TMOs perform several functions related to the hydrogen behavior:

i. they serve as effective catalysts for hydrogen abstraction reactions under the action of light,

ii. having the friable structure, they are appropriate for accommodation of the large number of the detached protons,

iii. they provide transport of the injected hydrogen atoms.

Niobium is a “relative” of vanadium in the periodic table of elements, both metals belonging to the group 5. Therefore it is reasonable to extend the research of photochromism in TMOs to Nb$_2$O$_5$. However, despite many ongoing investigations of the photochromism in V$_2$O$_5$ to the best of our knowledge, the photochromism in pure Nb$_2$O$_5$ was reported only once. Yao et al. prepared an amorphous Nb$_2$O$_5$ film by evaporation and discovered its photochromism.$^22$ Except for in this study, Nb$_2$O$_5$ has only been used as a dopant for other photochromic oxides.$^23$ The photochromism in Nb$_2$O$_5$ is poorly investigated, since the effect appears to be relatively small as compared with those of other TMOs, and colored Nb$_2$O$_5$ films bleach rapidly upon exposure to oxygen-containing media,$^22$ which hampers experiments.

However, Nb$_2$O$_5$ is also a material of interest for both its electrochromism$^25$ and its photochromism, and its photochromic properties must therefore be understood and the influence of various factors upon the photochromic response should be investigated. Study of Nb$_2$O$_5$ is also necessary for a general understanding of the photochromism in TMOs.

The objective of the research was to prepare various Nb$_2$O$_5$ phases with different characteristics and to perform a comparative analysis of their hydrogen photochromism. For this reason, we selected powders instead of films. Preparation of various Nb$_2$O$_5$...
phases requires high-temperature treatment, and by using the powders we avoid undesirable interactions between the films and the substrate, which could yield errors in the experiments.

Experimental

Preparation of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders

Except water, all reagents used in the experiments, namely, ammonium niobate (V) oxalate hydrate of 99.99% purity and ammonium hydroxide solution of 99.99% purity (28% NH$_3$ in H$_2$O), were commercial Sigma-Aldrich products. High-purity water with a resistivity of 18.2 MΩ cm at 25°C was prepared by a water purification system.

The hydrous niobium oxide was precipitated from a 0.8 M ammonium niobate oxalate hydrate solution by addition of ammonium hydroxide solution (drop by drop) until the pH value became higher than 7. The precipitate was filtered, washed with pure water three times, and dried at room temperature. The prepared hydrous oxide was then calcined at various temperatures for 2 h to get different phase structure. The Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders calcined at 500°C, 600°C, 900°C, 1100°C, and 1300°C are labelled as P$_{500}$, P$_{600}$, P$_{900}$, P$_{1100}$, and P$_{1300}$, respectively.

Illumination of the samples

The Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders were pressed into tablets and placed in a cell with a quartz window. The cell was connected to a flask containing absolute ethanol and zeolite powder and pumped down to a 5 kPa pressure. At this pressure, the ethanol started to bubble. The zeolite powder was used to stabilize the bubbling process. After 10 minutes of ventilation with ethanol vapor, the sample was illuminated by the full output of a 250 W high-pressure mercury lamp. Then, the illuminated samples were taken out of the cell and investigated using the diffuse reflection method.

Characterization of the samples

The combined thermogravimetric differential scanning calorimetry (TGA-DSC) analysis was performed using an STA8000 device (Perkin Elmer Inc.) at a 10°C /min scan rate over the 25–1330°C range with a 25 mL/min flow of nitrogen of 99.99% purity. The crystalline structure of the powders was investigated using the XRD analysis (see Fig 2d). The third peak (exothermic) at 1243°C is attributed to the formation of the H phase (PDF#37-1468, P2/3, monoclinic) from the M phase, which is again confirmed by the XRD results. The XRD pattern of the P$_{900}$ phase shows a mixture of the TT and M phases, indicating that the powders are undergoing the phase transformation. This is confirmed by the heat flow enhancement in the high temperature range, namely from ≈800°C to ≈1075°C (see the DSC curve). Since P$_{900}$ is a mixture of the two other phases we did not investigate it further; our objectives were to study the photochromic properties of “pure” phases.

Results and discussion

Phase transformation of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders

Nb$_2$O$_5$ has at least 12 different polymorphic forms, in which the T, TT, T$_2$, B, M$^{27}$ and H$^{29}$ phases are most commonly observed. Among these phases, the H phase is the most thermodynamically stable at atmospheric pressure.

The thermogravimetric analysis-differential scanning calorimetry (TG-DSC) curves registered simultaneously for the hydrous niobium pentoxide powders are presented in Fig. 1. Most of the H$_2$O and NH$_3$ molecules adsorbed on the oxide surface were evolved from the surface at $T < 500°C$, which yielded a 23.0% mass loss. The DSC curve shows three main peaks at $T > 500°C$. Only a 1.3% mass loss was registered in the range between 500 and 1300°C. The first exothermic peak at 584°C is attributed to the crystallization of the quasi amorphous powder to the TT crystalline phase (PDF#28-0317, P, pseudo-hexagonal)$^{27}$, which is proved by the X-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis (see Figs 2a and 2b). The second peak (endothermic) at 1075°C is due to the phase transformation from the TT phase to the M phase (PDF#32-0711, I4/mmm, tetragonal)$^{29}$, which is also confirmed by the XRD analysis (see Fig 2d). The third peak (exothermic) at 1243°C is attributed to the formation of the H phase (PDF#37-1468, P2/3, monoclinic)$^{30}$ from the M phase, which is again confirmed by the XRD results.

The SEM images in Fig. 3 show the morphologies of the powders. The grain size of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders obviously continuously increases with increasing calcination temperature. The relation between the grain size and the photochromic properties of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders will be discussed below.

Band gaps in the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders

The photochromism in the TMO is triggered by the photogenerated electron-hole pairs, as was found for the WO$_3$ and the V$_2$O$_5$ films.$^{14, 16, 22}$ We hypothesize that the main reason for the poor photochromic sensitivity and quick bleaching in Nb$_2$O$_5$ is that Nb$_2$O$_5$ has an electron work function much smaller than those for WO$_3$, MoO$_3$, and V$_2$O$_5$. In particular, its conduction band potential lies close to that for TiO$_2$.$^{33}$ Therefore, as Fig. 4 shows, despite the band gap width values are close in Nb$_2$O$_5$ and in photochromically highly disordered WO$_3$ films (see our results below and reference$^{34, 35}$) the electron injected into the Nb$_2$O$_5$ conduction band has a higher predisposition than in other oxide,
e.g., to participate in backward and secondary reactions, which in turn reduces the photochromic sensitivity.

Furthermore, the oxide band gap width is an important parameter that greatly influences the photochromic process. The band gap value of Nb$_2$O$_5$ varies between 2.35 eV and 4.2 eV in different reports depending on different preparation methods and morphologies. Therefore, it is important to determine the band gap values of different samples to investigate their photochromic properties.

The diffuse reflection spectra of different Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders were measured and converted into the Kubelka-Munk function ($F(R)$) by the equation

$$F(R) = \frac{(1-R)^2}{2R}.$$  

The plots of ($F(R)h\nu$)$^2$ versus $h\nu$ for different samples are given in Fig. 5. The band gap width ($E_g$) values were obtained by extrapolating the linear part of the plot to ($F(R)h\nu$)$^2 = 0$. Fig. 5 shows that the $E_g$ values for P$_{500}$, P$_{600}$, P$_{1100}$, and P$_{1300}$ are 3.49, 3.55, 3.34, and 3.23 eV, respectively.

Despite the low accuracy of this method, there is a noticeable difference in the band gap values between the two phases calcined at high temperatures and the two phases calcined at low temperatures. This is also confirmed by the experiment described in the next section.

![Fig. 2 X-ray diffraction (XRD) patterns for the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders: (a) P$_{500}$, (b) P$_{600}$, (c) P$_{1100}$ and (d) P$_{1300}$.](image)

![Fig. 3 Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images for the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders: (a) P$_{500}$, (b) P$_{600}$, (c) P$_{1100}$ and (d) P$_{1300}$.](image)

![Fig. 4 Schematic of the electronic band structure for WO$_3$ disordered films and Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders.](image)

![Fig. 5 Plots of ($F(R)h\nu$)$^2$ versus energy ($h\nu$) for determination of the band gap values of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders: (a) P$_{500}$, (b) P$_{600}$, (c) P$_{1100}$ and (d) P$_{1300}$.](image)

![Fig. 6 Visual appearance of the P$_{1100}$ powders (left image) illuminated through the mask (right image).](image)
Photochromism in the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders

The photochromic responses of P$_{500}$, P$_{600}$, P$_{1100}$, and P$_{1300}$ were examined. As-prepared hydrous Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders are white and preserve their color after calcination at temperatures up to 1200°C, whereas the samples calcined at 1300°C become slightly yellowish. The illumination of P$_{1300}$ and P$_{1100}$ in ethanol vapor caused the samples to acquire a deep blue color. The colored P$_{1100}$ is shown in Fig. 6. The illumination of P$_{500}$ in ethanol vapor caused a similar but much attenuated effect, whereas P$_{600}$ did not exhibit photochromism. The photochromic response was not observed under illumination in air, nitrogen, water vapor, or a mixture of air and ethanol vapor for any investigated sample.

The diffuse reflection spectra for P$_{1100}$ before and after illumination are presented in Fig. 7a, which shows that the reflection decreases gradually in the whole visible–near infrared range with exposure, although the reflection in the red part of the spectrum is definitely much smaller than that in the blue part. For this reason, the powder acquires a blue color that continuously becomes deeper with illumination time.

![Diffuse reflection spectra of P$_{1100}$ powders measured along (a) the coloration process and (b) the bleaching process.](image)

The coloration of the TMOs upon insertion of hydrogen atoms is attributed to the appearance of the lower-valence cations, and, in turn, to the optical transitions between neighboring non-isovalent cations. For Nb$_2$O$_5$, these are the transitions between Nb$^{4+}$ and Nb$^{5+}$ cations:

\[ \text{Nb}^{4+} (A) + \text{Nb}^{5+} (B) \rightarrow \text{Nb}^{5+} (A) + \text{Nb}^{4+} (B) \]

Bleaching of the colored Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders can be observed in the presence of oxygen, as was reported for amorphous Nb$_2$O$_5$ films, but in P$_{1100}$ and P$_{1300}$ this process was much slower. The diffuse reflection spectra for the colored P$_{1100}$ measured at various times in the bleaching process are shown in Fig. 7b. The color barely changed when the sample was held in air for several hours. After one week of storage in air, the colored P$_{1100}$ was still light blue. Full bleaching was achieved after approximately two weeks of storage in air. At 80°C, the bleaching can be essentially accelerated, and the samples return to their initial colors after ≈24 h. The bleaching in air occurs through oxidation of the formed niobium hydrogen bronze H$_2$Nb$_2$O$_5$:

\[ \text{H}_2\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5 + x/2 \text{O}_2 \rightarrow \text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5 + x/2 \text{H}_2\text{O} \]

The coloration-bleaching process is reversible, and we did not notice any decay of the photochromic sensitivities of P$_{1100}$ and P$_{1300}$ over at least five coloration-bleaching cycles. The diffuse reflection spectra for the coloration and bleaching processes in P$_{1300}$ were also measured, but are not presented here since they are very similar to those of P$_{1100}$.

To illustrate the kinetics of the coloration and bleaching of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders, the areas between each reflection spectrum in coloration process and the reflection spectrum of the as-prepared P$_{1100}$ or P$_{1300}$ were integrated, and the obtained values $\Delta$ were plotted against the illumination time $t$ in Fig 8a; the areas between each reflection spectrum in bleaching process and the reflection spectrum of the colored P$_{1100}$ or P$_{1300}$ before bleaching were integrated, and the obtained values $\Delta$ were plotted against the bleaching time $t$ in Fig 8b. Fig. 8a shows that the maximum reaction rate occurs at the very beginning of the coloration process.

![The changes in the integrated diffuse reflection $\Delta$ of the Nb$_2$O$_5$ powders along (a) coloration process and (b) bleaching process.](image)
This kinetic behaviour is very similar to that found for the other TMOs and is typical for photochemical reactions driven by holes. For such reactions, the reaction rate decreases with increasing Fermi level.\(^4\) The higher position of the conduction band potential in Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) leads to a higher Fermi level. Thus, the equilibrium state can be achieved for the hydrogenation reaction under the action of light:

\[
\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5 + \text{RH} + \text{hv} \leftrightarrow \text{H}_x\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5 + \text{RH}_1-x
\]

where \(R\) denotes the radicals formed when hydrogen atoms are detached from the hydrogen donor molecules and \(x\) is the non-stoichiometric parameter. When the equilibrium between the forward and backward reactions is achieved, the hydrogenation process is stopped. The higher the position of the Fermi level, the faster the equilibrium is achieved.

The fact that no photochromism is observed under illumination in a mixture of air and ethanol vapor indicates that the oxidation of the detached hydrogen atoms is faster than their photoinduced splitting from ethanol molecules. This is a very important finding, since the other photochromic TMOs exhibit photochromism in the presence of air if hydrogen donor molecules are adsorbed on their surfaces. We attribute this result to the high conduction band potential in Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) as compared with those of other TMOs. The bleaching rate may be retarded by diffusion of the injected hydrogen atoms inside of the grains, which can be accelerated by increasing the temperature or decreasing the particle size.

The photochromism in Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) exhibits some very interesting paradoxes. Generally, amorphous TMOs have higher photochromic sensitivities because of their higher specific surface areas.\(^5\), \(^2\) The specific surface area is a very important factor influencing the photochromic sensitivity, since the higher the surface area is, the more reactive centers exist on the surface for the photoinjection of hydrogen into the oxide. However, the amorphous Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) sample (P\(_{500}\)) showed a lower coloration efficiency than the M phase (P\(_{1100}\)) or the H phase (P\(_{1300}\)). After 2 h of illumination, the maximum coloration was achieved in P\(_{500}\), which was similar to the coloration of P\(_{1100}\) after 5 min of illumination. P\(_{500}\) exhibits noticeable bleaching in the first few seconds after the sample is exposed to air. Full bleaching of the colored P\(_{500}\) occurred in several minutes. For this reason, the reflection was not measured for colored P\(_{500}\) in this research.

There are several reasons for such behavior of P\(_{500}\). First, it has a higher \(E_g\) than P\(_{1100}\) or P\(_{1300}\). The spectrum of a high-pressure mercury lamp contains a series of bands in the UV range, and the band at 3.40 eV (\(\lambda = 365\) nm) is the most intense.\(^4\) However, this irradiation cannot efficiently generate electron-hole pairs in P\(_{500}\), since the energy of the photons is less than the band gap. When we replaced the quartz window of the cell with toughened glass to exclude irradiation by photons with energies \(E_g = 3.40\) eV, P\(_{500}\) showed no photochromic response. This experiment also proved that the accuracy of the test for the band gap value is sufficient to support our conclusions. Second, the larger bandwidth indicates a higher Fermi level of the injected electrons, which in turn leads to their higher reactivity in the backward surface reactions, which reduces the photochromic sensitivity.

There is a clear correlation between the band gap value and the photochromic properties: the phases with higher \(E_g\) (P\(_{500}\) and P\(_{600}\)) have either no or poor photochromic responses, whereas the phases with the lower \(E_g\) possess good photochromic properties.

On the other hand, the morphology of the P\(_{1100}\) and P\(_{1300}\) phase can also retard the rise in the Fermi level under illumination. Because of the structural disorder in the P\(_{500}\) and P\(_{600}\) phases, there are a large number of surface defects in these phases (see Fig. 3a) that may serve as traps for the injected particles and hamper their diffusion into the oxide bulk. The activity of the injected electrons in the backward reactions is determined by the Fermi level on the oxide surface. Diffusion of the electron-proton plasma can reduce the Fermi level on the oxide surface and retard the rise in the Fermi level due to hydrogenation. Thus, the diffusion of the plasma can be helpful in the coloration process.

The fast bleaching of colored P\(_{500}\) may be also attributed to the small grain size. The grain size of P\(_{500}\) in Fig. 3a is much smaller than the grain sizes of P\(_{1100}\) or P\(_{1300}\) (Fig. 3b). It would take much more time for the inserted protons and electrons to diffuse from the grain bulk of these large particles to the oxide surface. For this reason, these different phases exhibit greatly different bleaching processes.

In summary, the main parameter influencing the photochromic response in the polymorphous Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) phases is the electron band structure, whereas the electron-proton plasma diffusion, grain size, and morphology have smaller influences on the hydrogenation and dehydrogenation processes.

**Conclusions**

For the first time, it was shown that the different Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) phases exhibit very different photochromic properties that depend upon the oxide band gap value. We achieved the highest ever reported photochromic response for the P\(_{1100}\) and P\(_{1300}\) Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) phases. We investigated the kinetics of the photocoloration and bleaching in these phases and demonstrated that these processes are reversible.

The most important achievement in this research is the isolation of the photochromic Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) phase among the different Nb\(_2\)O\(_5\) phases. For this phase, the hydrogen photochromism will be investigated more deeply using other methods in future research.

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**Notes and references**

\(^4\) Center for Composite Materials and Structures, Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin 150080, China
\(^5\) Department of Physics, Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin 150080, China
\(^6\) School of Chemical Engineering and Technology, Harbin Institute of Technology, Harbin 150001, China
\(^4\) A.F. Ioffe Physical Technical Institute of Russian Academy of Sciences, 194021 Polytekhicheskaya Street 26, Sankt-Petersburg, Russia
\(^9\) To whom the correspondence should be addressed: Yaoli@hit.edu.cn, Gavrilyuk@mail.ioffe.ru