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Graphene nanosheets loaded with Pt nanoparticles with enhanced electrochemical performance for sodium-oxygen batteries

Sanpei Zhang, Zhaoyin Wen*, Kun Rui, Chen Shen, Yan Lu, Jianhua Yang

Graphene nanosheets loaded with highly dispersed platinum nanoparticles (Pt@GNSs) are prepared by a simple and effective hydrothermal method. Pt@GNSs as air cathode material exhibits a very high initial discharge capacity of 7574 mAh/g at the current density of 0.1 mA/cm² and delivers a stable cycling performance. The electrocatalytic characteristic of Pt on Na-O₂ cell is firstly investigated.

The abundance of sodium makes Na-O₂ batteries suitable for large scale application, especially in comparison with the lithium-based batteries due to the limited supply of lithium resource. However, research on Na-O₂ cells is still in an infant stage. Unlike for non-aqueous lithium-oxygen cells where Li₂O₂ is formed, reports on the nature of the discharge product in sodium-oxygen cells are less consistent and different discharge products have been reported.ı

Recently, Hartmann et al. found sodium superoxide (NaO₂) as the discharge product with low overpotential using a carbon-fibre gas diffusion layer as the cathode and sodium triflate salt in tetraethylene glycol dimethyl ether (DEGDME) as electrolyte. In addition, they also studied the impact of the local current density and different type of carbon on the sodium superoxide (NaO₂) battery. Zhao et al. also reported NaO₂ as the discharge product in the static Ar/O₂ (80/20 vol%) using vertically aligned carbon nanotubes as air electrode and sodium triflate salt in tetraethylene glycol dimethyl ether electrolyte. However, Jiang et al. found Na₂O₂·2H₂O as the main product using CNT paper as air electrode and 0.5 M NaSO₄/CF₅/DEGDME as electrolyte. Fu et al. has investigated Na-O₂ cells with carbonate and ether based electrolytes while different carbon materials were used as the air electrode. Their results indicated the formation of sodium peroxide (Na₂O₂) but with a significant fraction of sodium carbonate as a discharge product with the use of either carbonate or ether electrolytes. In a work by Kim et al. using a propylene carbonate (PC) based electrolyte solution (1 M NaClO₄) sodium carbonate was the main discharge product. In experiments using tetruglyme with 1 M NaClO₄, they found Na₂O₂·2H₂O and trace amounts of sodium hydroxide. They proposed different charge/discharge mechanisms with various discharge products. Meanwhile, McCloskey et al. present a comparative study of non-aqueous Li-O₂ and Na-O₂ batteries employing an ether-based electrolyte and found “cleaner” chemistry with lower amount of parasitic products during the charge cycle of the Na-O₂ cell. Their results indicated that Li₂O₂ is more reactive than NaO₂, leading to the observed large charge overpotential. Besides, Lee et al. pointed out that the minimum energy barrier for the NaO₂ decomposition was substantially lower than that of Li₂O₂ decomposition using first-principle calculation. Kang et al. indicated that NaO₂ is only more stable at nanoscale below 10 nm in particle size by theoretical calculation.

With respect to previous work on Na-O₂ cells the main questions are remained: i) what determines the nature of the discharge product, i.e., the NaO₂, Na₂O₂, Na₂O₂·H₂O and Na₂CO₃; ii) in terms of NaO₂ as discharge product, the large overpotential during discharge (ηdis > 250 mV), limited discharge capacity and poor cycle performance with cycling limitation mode have been found. iii) the potential gap of Na-O₂ during charge is usually higher than 1 V and poor cycle performance have been found with other sodium compounds as discharge products. The aforementioned studies focused on the impact of electrolyte, type of carbon and testing atmosphere, but only a few on catalysts.

Fig. 1 Schematic for structure and proposed electrocatalytic mechanism of Na-O₂ cell.

Herein, we developed a new bifunctional oxygen electrode with graphene nanosheets as the support and studied the electrochemical
Graphite powder was synthesized by the oxidation of graphite powder using the modified Hummers’ method\textsuperscript{11}. Then platinum nanoparticles were grown in situ on the graphene nanosheets via a traditional hydrothermal method\textsuperscript{12}. Specifically, 60 mg GNSs was dispersed in a mixture of 20 mL ethylene glycol and 1.5 mL 0.1 g/mL H\textsubscript{2}PtCl\textsubscript{6} solution. After 30 min ultrasonication treatment, the suspension was transferred into a 50 mL Teflon-lined autoclave and heated at 120°C for 4 hours. Final graphene nanosheets loaded with Pt nanoparticles were then washed thoroughly with water and ethanol and dried at 80°C for 12h under vacuum. As the cell structure schematic shown in Fig. 1, the cathode and anode were separated simply by electrolyte without any separator. The detail of cell assembly was described in the Experimental section in the ESI.\textsuperscript{†}

Possible reaction mechanism of the synthesized Pt@GNSs cathode is proposed.

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![Fig. 2 TEM image of GNSs (a) and Pt@GNSs (b), (c) XRD of Pt@GNSs, (d) TG of Pt@GNSs.](image)

Fig. 2a shows the TEM image of GNSs. Clean and transparent wrinkle sheets are observed, indicating that the graphene nanosheets have been successfully exfoliated from the graphite flake. After the hydrothermal procedure, Pt nanoparticles are homogeneously grown on the graphene nanosheets as TEM image indicated (Fig. 2b). The particle size of platinum is found to be ~5nm, which is the catalysts’ ideal size for oxygen reduction reaction\textsuperscript{13}. To further investigate the structural information of the product, X-ray diffraction (XRD) was carried out. As shown in Fig. 2c, all the diffraction peaks agree well with the standard pattern of Pt@GNSs, revealing the high purity of the product\textsuperscript{14}. TG analysis was carried out to identify the chemical composition of Pt@GNSs (Fig. 2d). An obvious weight loss occurred between 250°C and 500°C when the composite was heated in air atmosphere, which was mainly ascribed to the oxidation of carbon generating CO\textsubscript{2}. The mass fractions of platinum in Pt@GNSs composite is 30.69% based on the mass loss result.

In order to understand the role of Pt in the oxygen evolution reaction (OER) and oxygen reduction reaction (ORR), we compared the electrochemical performance of Pt@GNSs and GNSs as cathodes for sodium oxygen batteries. Fig. 3a is the first discharge and charge profiles of the Na\textsubscript{2}O\textsubscript{2} battery. The charge and discharge measurement was carried out at the current density of 0.1mA/cm\textsuperscript{2}. The specific capacity of the GNSs and Pt@GNSs electrodes is based on the mass of GNSs and the total mass of GNSs and Pt, respectively. The discharge capacity of Pt@GNSs is 7574mAh/g, while only 5413mAh/g for GNSs cathode can be obtained at the same current density. About 40% increase of discharge capacity demonstrates that Pt@GNSs has a much higher OER catalytic activity than that of GNSs. Several reasons are deduced as follows. Firstly, the presence of Pt nanoparticles supplies more oxygen adsorption sites, like a reservoir for oxygen, which benefits the increase of discharge capacity; secondly, uniformly dispersed Pt nanoparticles are conducive to the homogeneously deposition of discharge products, which efficiently alleviates the blockage of oxygen diffusion channels due to the discharge product aggregation, leading to a good capacity performance; besides, the good conductivity of Pt nanoparticles is in favour of the conductivity of the air electrode especially when they are embedded in insulating discharge products.

Despite the excellent discharge performance due to the Pt nanoparticles, Pt@GNSs cathode exhibited complicated polarization features. Generally speaking, on one hand, initial charge-discharge performance of the air electrodes before and after Pt nanoparticles deposition is not improved distinctly (Fig. 3a). On the other hand, long-time polarization performance after composited with Pt nanoparticles is obviously enhanced by comparing Fig. 3b and 3c. The average discharge voltage plateau is about 2.3V, which is consistent with the theoretical value of Na-O\textsubscript{2} batteries\textsuperscript{15}. The charge voltage plateau is ~3.4V, significantly lower than that reported for Na\textsubscript{2}O\textsubscript{2} or Na\textsubscript{2}CO\textsubscript{3} decomposition\textsuperscript{7}, which may be ascribed to the specific cell structure design in our present work. Unlike the case in Li-O\textsubscript{2} batteries\textsuperscript{16}, the Pt nanoparticles do not display evident catalytic activity on decreasing the charge and charge overpotentials with 1M NaClO\textsubscript{4}/PC as the electrolyte. However, the Pt@GNSs cathode does display higher electrochemical activity than GNSs for OER process.

The long-time polarization performance of the two cathodes cycled at a low depth of discharge with a capacity limitation of 1000mAh/g at 0.1mA/cm\textsuperscript{2} were investigated, as presented in Fig. 3b and 3c. For GNSs electrode (Fig. 3b), the voltage polarization became serious with dramatically increase of charge voltage upon cycling, especially in the 9th cycle, which is ascribed to the lack of catalyst. Meanwhile, obvious discharge capacity decrease happens after the 2nd cycle. The capacity fading may be caused by the insoluble discharge products accumulation in the porous network of the GNSs cathode\textsuperscript{17}. As for Pt@GNSs electrode (Fig. 3c), the...
To obtain deeper insights into the overall electrochemistry and role of Pt, the discharged positive electrodes were harvested and investigated by TEM, FTIR, and XPS. Ex-situ TEM images (Fig. 4a) indicate the formation of discharge products on the positive electrode. The high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM) image is shown in Fig. 4b. Interplanar spacings of 2.03 Å, 2.26 Å and 2.54 Å are consistent with the d spacings of (221), (226) and (310) planes of Na$_2$CO$_3$, respectively. In addition, the same behaviour was observed with the FTIR spectra shown in Fig. 5. Comparison of electrode materials before and after discharge to 1.8V reveals the characteristic peaks at 1426 cm$^{-1}$ and 879 cm$^{-1}$, which are corresponding to O-C=O vibrations of Na$_2$CO$_3$. Besides, The X-ray photoemission spectroscopy (Fig. 4c and d) presents the Na1s and Cls analysis of the Pt@GNSs cathode after discharge to 1.8V.

Fig. 4 (a) TEM images of discharge products on the Pt@GNSs cathode, (b) HRTEM image and the corresponding Fourier transform pattern of area 1 in (a), (c) Na1s XPS spectra of the Pt@GNSs as cathode after discharge to 1.8V, (d) Cls XPS spectra of the cathode after discharge to 1.8V.

Voltage polarization during cycling is inhibited with stable discharge and charge voltage plateaus at about 2.38V and 3.6V, respectively, demonstrating the important role of Pt catalyst in the air electrode. It is deduced that the introduction of Pt nanoparticles may be helpful for the decomposition of the discharge products due to the difference of the oxygen adsorb between Pt and graphene.

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Based on the analysis above, a possible reaction mechanism for Na-O$_2$ cell is proposed (Fig. 1). During the charging process, the Na-O$_2$ cell electrolyte containing NaClO$_3$/PC electrolyte evolves a certain amount of CO$_2$ which reacts with the Na$_2$O$_2$ to form Na$_2$CO$_3$. With the accumulation of insoluble Na$_2$CO$_3$, the discharge capacity of GNSs significantly decreases. However, as for Pt@GNSs, oxygen reduction reaction is kinetically preferred on the platinum surface. It may be helpful for Na$_2$CO$_3$ to be reduced to Na or other Na-based products. Thus, we deduce that platinum nanoparticles may have a complex effect on the performance of air electrode for Na-O$_2$ batteries. However, owing to few studies focused on Na-O$_2$ battery, more experiments should be conducted to further understand the electrolytic mechanism of Na-O$_2$ batteries.

Conclusions

In summary, the Pt@GNSs are successfully synthesized by a simple hydrothermal method and the platinum nanoparticles are uniformly dispersed on the graphene nanosheets with a particle size of ~5nm. The Pt@GNSs used as cathode showed a high discharge capacity of 7574mAh/g at the current density of 0.1mA/cm$^2$ and good cycling performance with a limited discharge capacity of 1000mAh/g. Our results demonstrated that the highly dispersed Pt nanoparticles supported by graphene nanosheets possess high electrocatalytic activity for cathode reactions in rechargeable sodium-oxygen batteries. And the complicated catalytic character of platinum in Na-O$_2$ cells is an interesting and inspiring result.

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Notes and references

CAS Key Laboratory of Materials for Energy Conversion, Shanghai Institute of Ceramics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai 200050, P. R. China. Fax: +86-21-52413903; Tel: +86-21-52411704; E-mail: zywer@mail.sic.ac.cn

† Electronic Supplementary Information (ESI) available: Experimental section and detail of cell structure. See DOI: 10.1039/c000000x/


