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## Bio-inspired design: bulk iron-nickel sulfide allows for efficient solvent-dependent CO<sub>2</sub> reduction†

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The electrocatalytic reduction of carbon dioxide ( $CO_2RR$ ) to valuable bulk chemicals is set to become a vital factor in the prevention of environmental pollution and the selective storage of sustainable energy. Inspired by structural analogues to the active site of the enzyme  $CODH_{Ni}$ , we envisioned that bulk Fe/Ni sulfides would enable the efficient reduction of  $CO_2$ . By careful adjustment of the process conditions, we demonstrate that pentlandite ( $Fe_{4.5}Ni_{4.5}S_8$ ) electrodes, in addition to HER, also support the  $CO_2RR$  reaching a peak faradaic efficiency of 87% and 13% for the formation of CO and methane, respectively at 3 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>. The choice of solvent, the presence of water/protons and  $CO_2$  solubility are identified as key-properties to adjust the balance between HER and  $CO_2RR$  in favour of the latter. Such experiments can thus serve as model reactions to elucidate a potential catalyst within gas diffusion electrodes.

## Introduction

Energy production from fossil fuels results in critical environmental contaminations due to the emission of the greenhouse gas CO<sub>2</sub> into earth's atmosphere. While CO<sub>2</sub> acts as a pollutant, it is also a cheap and abundant C1-feedstock for carbon-based chemicals if efficient pathways for its conversion are established.<sup>2</sup> Especially, the development of sustainable production processes by means of electrocatalysis are a promising pathway to efficiently activate CO2 and allow for the utilization of electricity from renewable sources like wind or photovoltaics.3 While electrochemical CO<sub>2</sub> reduction was previously shown, the hampered mass transport and low water solubility of CO<sub>2</sub> render this process still inefficient and instead facilitate the formation of H2.4,5 In addition, the metal-substrate binding strength (H<sup>+</sup> vs. CO<sub>2</sub>), and electron transfer kinetics at the material surface, are among the key factors for the selectivity of the electrocatalytic CO<sub>2</sub> reduction.<sup>6,7</sup> While low-coordinated Cunanoparticle sites facilitate HER, up to a certain extent, nanostructuring of Cu particles was shown to favor CO2 reduction over HER.8-11 General design principles leading to more efficient electrochemical CO2 reduction catalysts, however, are not yet available.12 Notably, the capability of a catalyst to show either

Contrary to artificial catalysts,  $^{18-20}$  nature has developed sophisticated machineries to allow for an efficient CO<sub>2</sub> reduction. *E.g.* the carbon monoxide dehydrogenase<sup>21</sup> allows for selective reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> to CO at -0.52 V  $\nu s$ . NHE and ambient pressure with turn over frequencies of up to 700 molecules per h. $^{22-24}$ 

The efficient enzymatic reactivity is related to its unique [Ni-4Fe-5S] cluster (Fig. 1a), a finely enzyme regulated amount of protons/water at the reactive center, as well as a directed  $\rm CO_2$  access to the low valent active sites. Furthermore, the protein scaffold of the enzyme allows for a synchronized influx of electrons and substrates enabling high enzymatic selectivity. We and others recently showed that efficient electrocatalysts

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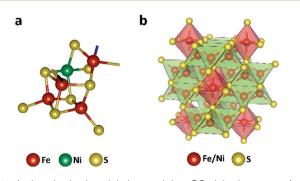


Fig. 1 Active site in the nickel-containing CO dehydrogenase (pdb: 1su6) (a) and crystal structure of the  $Fe_{4.5}Ni_{4.5}S_8$  (b).

HER or  $CO_2RR$  activity usually depends on the process conditions applied. *E.g.* Cu and pyrite (FeS<sub>2</sub>) were both reported to facilitate H<sub>2</sub> generation as well as  $CO_2$  reduction at various conditions and further support the Janus-faced character of both processes.<sup>13–17</sup>

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can be designed following natural principles.24-31 In particular, the mineral Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> (Fig. 1b) acted as a functional mimic for [NiFe] hydrogenase and allowed for H+ reduction at overpotentials of 190 mV at 10 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> with high stability and without the need of any artificial nano-structuring. The distinct material composition of the electrode surface and its high conductivity was shown to be responsible for its activity and supported by operando phonon spectroscopy as well as scanning electrochemical cell microscopy.32,33 Following our previous design concepts for electrode materials and our knowledge on the surface and bulk structural composition, 26,32,33 we reasoned that due to close structural analogy with the enzyme CO dehydrogenase (CODH<sub>Ni</sub>), Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> should likewise act as a potential electrocatalyst for the reduction of CO2. Here, comparable to the CODH<sub>Ni</sub>, Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> possesses distinct [Fe,Ni] sulfur clusters and reveals Fe-Ni sites with an M-M bond of around 2.6 Å [ca. 2.8 Å in CODH<sub>Ni</sub>]<sup>21</sup> that is bridged by labile sulfur atoms. This bio-inspired design attempt is further supported by the hydrothermal hydrogenation of CO2 observed in hydrothermal vents and facilitated by Fe<sub>2</sub>Ni<sub>7</sub>S<sub>8</sub> possessing a pentlandite structure.34 Considering the observed natural performance and the close resemblance of FeNi sulfides to the enzyme CO dehydrogenase, it is surprising that up to now only little is known about the performance of such iron- and nickelsulfide materials for CO<sub>2</sub>RR.<sup>24</sup> Markedly, solely pyrite (FeS<sub>2</sub>)<sup>13</sup> and greigite (Fe<sub>3</sub>S<sub>4</sub>)<sup>35-37</sup> were previously reported to allow electrochemical reduction of CO2 in water but with low overall faradaic efficiencies (FE) for CO2 reduction (<10%) with low stability. We herein show that Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> bulk electrodes can efficiently facilitate CO<sub>2</sub>RR with high faradaic efficiency towards CO formation (87  $\pm$  4%), at moderate current densities (3 mA cm $^{-2}$ ) and potentials (-1.8 V vs. NHE). We furthermore reveal the electrochemical behavior of common C1-reduction products like formaldehyde, CO, or formic acid explaining the observed product distribution.

## Results and discussion

#### Solvent dependency of CO<sub>2</sub>RR with pentlandite

Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> was synthesized via a high-temperature route at 1100 °C following literature procedures.<sup>25,38</sup> Pellet electrodes were prepared from the as-synthesized material, mounted into a Teflon casing.33 Their performance was subsequently tested in different organic and aqueous electrolytes (Fig. 2a and b). While performing linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) from 0 to  $-2.2 \text{ V} \nu s$ . NHE and controlled potential coulometry (CPC) at various potentials, the electrolyte solution was continuously purged with CO<sub>2</sub> and the gas flow analyzed by online gas chromatography.

Likewise, the liquid phase was analyzed via HPLC analysis to reveal any potentially soluble reduction products. However, neither alcohols, carboxylic acids or aldehydes were detected. In aqueous KHCO<sub>3</sub> (0.1 M), the bulk electrode shows a catalytic current density of 20 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at -1.3 V. In contrast, in methanol, pyridine/water (0.01%) and acetonitrile (113 ppm H<sub>2</sub>O; 0.01%), comparable catalytic currents were observed at significantly more negative potentials of -1.6, -1.7 and -2.1 V,

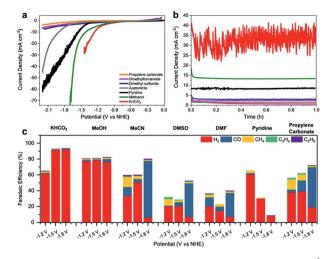


Fig. 2 (a) Linear sweep voltammograms recorded at 5 mV  $\rm s^{-1}$  in saturated CO<sub>2</sub> solutions. (b) Controlled potential coulometry (CPC) was performed in different electrolytes (0.1 M TBAPF<sub>6</sub>) at -1.80 V vs. NHE and (c) the composition of the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction products analyzed by on-line gas chromatography after 1 h. Notably, formation of soluble reduction products was not observed in additionally performed GC and HPLC experiments.

respectively. In dimethylformamide (DMF), dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) or propylene carbonate (PC) containing 0.1 M TBAPF<sub>6</sub>, current densities above 10 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> were not observed reaching only maximum values of ca. 7.6 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> at -2.2 V.

While certainly, the lower conductivity and with it the higher charge transfer resistance of the organic solvents will have an influence on the currents, the higher proton concentration in the more protic solvents also facilitates the H2 generation (Fig. 2c). Notably, in aqueous KHCO<sub>3</sub>, a faradaic efficiency (FE) for  $H_2$  formation of up to 93% was observed at -1.8 V vs. NHE which is in line with the previously reported high activity of this material towards HER. The contribution of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR is small and CO, CH<sub>4</sub> as well as C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> were observed with low faradaic efficiencies of 1.0%, 0.2% and 0.1%, respectively. While at  $-1.2 \text{ V} \text{ vs. NHE in KHCO}_3 \text{ HER is still the dominating reaction,}$ the contribution of the CO<sub>2</sub>RR is slightly improved revealing faradaic efficiencies of 1.2% (CO), 1.8% (CH<sub>4</sub>), 0.3% (C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub>) and 61.5% (H<sub>2</sub>). The observed performance of Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> is in good agreement with the reports on greigite and pyrite in aqueous conditions.13,14,35

Although water is indeed the preferred electrolyte to perform CO<sub>2</sub>RR, the obvious CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, led us to further investigate the role of other solvents in this process. The utilization of organic solvents is furthermore accompanied by a firm control of the proton concentration in the electrocatalytic double layer leading to analogous conditions that are usually found in gas diffusion electrode layers.39 In dry methanol, HER is still the dominating process (FE 78%). However, the fraction of CO<sub>2</sub>RR on the total faradaic efficiency is increased showing that the lower acidity of methanol, and thereby the lower proton availability, facilitates CO<sub>2</sub> reduction (Table S1†). The overall impact of CO2RR in MeOH likewise slightly increases at more negative potentials with total faradaic efficiencies for all detected carbon

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products of 3.2% at -1.2 V to 5.7% at -1.8 V  $\nu s$ . NHE. In pyridine, HER is significantly suppressed showing faradaic efficiencies for  $H_2$  of solely 60, 30 and 8% at -1.2, -1.5 and -1.8 V. In addition, a clear increase of the FE for CH<sub>4</sub> from solely 0.3 to 3.0% at -1.2 V was observed. In contrast, in MeCN, DMSO, DMF and PC, Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> electrodes reveal a significantly altered behavior. In these solvents, the faradaic yields for HER are

significantly reduced and an increased amount of CO2RR products is observed. It is noteworthy that in MeCN and PC methane (FE 12.8% in MeCN, 8.3% in DMSO and 13.0% in PC) and ethylene (FE 0.5% in MeCN, 2.2% in DMSO and 1.4% in PC) are the major products at -1.2 V vs. NHE which corroborates the finding of pentlandite being capable to hydrothermally hydrogenate CO2.34 At very negative potentials, the CO formation capability of

the material is generally increased reaching FE as high as 71% in MeCN, 42% in DMSO and 51% in PC at potentials of -1.8 V. Surprisingly, the product distribution in DMF is less dependent on the potential applied showing steady methane formation (FE 23%) and smaller variations in CO formation (FE 11-30%) as compared to MeCN, DMSO and PC. While CH4 and CO are the main products from CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, it is notable that especially in aprotic solvents C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> are also observed (Fig. 2c). E.g. FE for C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> of 2.2% (DMSO), 0.7% (DMF) and 0.5% (MeCN) were observed. Likewise, C2H6 was observed in the range of 1-1.3%, respectively. The faradaic efficiencies below 100% observed within the non-protic solvents can most-likely be assigned to high capacitive currents and poor conductivity leading to e.g. heat formation, gas leakage, as well as a potential partial re-oxidation of CO2 reduction products and are not necessarily an effect of the electrode behavior in the different solvents.40 However, these amounts are among the highest ever reported for non-Cu containing materials (Table S4†).41 We conclude that beside the proton availability and the solvent chosen, the CO<sub>2</sub> solubility in the various solvents has a major influence on the CO2RR by enhancing the effective concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> at the electrode surface.

The solubility of CO<sub>2</sub> in acetonitrile (0.27 M) was reported to be significantly higher compared to water (0.04 M) and methanol (0.16 M).42 Likewise, an increased CO2 solubility is observed for DMF (0.18 M)43 and PC (6.97 M)43 which encourages the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction in these solvents (Table S5†). However, the solubility of CO<sub>2</sub> in DMSO is just 0.02 M and contradicts this hypothesis. In this regard, the proton availability which is commonly displayed by the acidity of water in a particular electrolyte or the solvent itself will influence CO2RR and is highlighted by increased HER activity in aqueous KHCO<sub>3</sub> (pK<sub>a</sub> 10.3) compared to MeOH (p $K_a$  16).

#### Dependency on water/proton concentration

The efficiency of CO<sub>2</sub>RR seems to be a compromise between altered proton concentration at the electrode surface (generally caused by the water content in a given solvent) and the capability of a certain electrolyte to efficiently absorb CO<sub>2</sub>. We thus opted to determine the influence of the water amount on the activity of Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> electrodes. Hence, we examined the

selectivity towards CO2RR using MeCN electrolyte solutions with varying water concentrations (24-30 000 ppm) (Table S3†) by performing LSV (Fig. 3a).

A shift of the potential necessary to achieve a catalytic current of  $-20 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$  to lower potentials (-2.1 V; 24 ppm  $H_2O \nu s. -1.3 V$ ; 30 000 ppm) is observed as the water concentration in the electrolyte increases. However, gas analyses after 1 h CPC at -1.8 V clearly shows that at higher water concentrations HER is facilitated and CO<sub>2</sub>RR is suppressed (Fig. 3b). While for high water concentrations in the electrolyte, FEs of 87% (30 000 ppm) and 62% (5000 ppm) are observed for hydrogen, only 11% and 19% FE, respectively, were found for CO. Contrary, in the presence of lower water concentrations, CO<sub>2</sub>RR becomes the dominant reaction. Here, FE for CO significantly increases to 37% (500 ppm H<sub>2</sub>O) and 87% (24 ppm H<sub>2</sub>O), respectively, concomitant with a decrease of the FE for HER to 14% and 3%, respectively.

In control experiments using Ar purged electrolytes containing 24 ppm H<sub>2</sub>O, no formation of CO<sub>2</sub>RR was observed (Fig. S6†). In addition, to rule out a suppressed oxidation on the anode side due to an imbalanced amount of charges passed through the system, we added conc. sulfuric acid to the acetonitrile mixture at the cathodes chamber. This allows for a fast HER reaction and allows for a comparable oxidation reaction as observed under CO2RR catalytic condition. Similarly, no increased formation of CO2 reduction products (Fig. S7†) was observed proving the dominant reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> rather than electrolyte decomposition. Similar results were observed when using DMSO or DMF under otherwise identical conditions. To confirm the origin of the various C-products observed, we performed a mass-selective product analysis utilizing 13CO2 in acetonitrile under otherwise identical electrochemical conditions. While the observed mass peak of 29 is indicative for the formation of <sup>13</sup>CO from <sup>13</sup>CO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. S9†), the unaltered mass

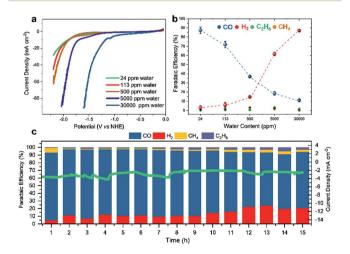


Fig. 3 Linear sweep voltammograms recorded at 5 mV s<sup>-1</sup> in MeCN with different water content and CO<sub>2</sub> purge (a), faradaic efficiencies of CO<sub>2</sub> reduction products in the gas phase at a constant potential of −1.8 V vs. NHE from MeCN with various amounts of water (b). Long term electrolysis for 15 h at -1.8 V vs. NHE with 24 ppm water including the observed faradaic efficiencies (c).

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pattern of ethane suggests a different origin (Fig. S10†). We thus repeated the CO2 reduction experiment in the presence of CD<sub>3</sub>CN. The resulting mass pattern and the observed mass peak at 33 clearly indicate the formation of C<sub>2</sub>D<sub>3</sub>H<sub>3</sub> and suggest that ethane originates from the hydrogenation of acetonitrile rather than reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. S10†). Likewise, we analyzed the origin of CH<sub>4</sub> that was observed within our experiments via the same technique. While the MS pattern of CH<sub>4</sub> overlaps with those of the reaction matrix under the applied instrumental conditions, increase of the peak intensity at m/z = 17 and the missing higher mass peaks for CD<sub>3</sub>H and derivatives upon performing the experiments in CD<sub>3</sub>CN indicate that likewise CH<sub>4</sub> is formed from CO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. S11†).

Notably, fine-tuning of the water concentration in the electrolysis cell and the applied potential allows for the tailored electrochemical production of syngas (Table S4†). Markedly, for CH<sub>4</sub> and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> that were likewise found as reduction products, FE is independent of the water concentration (Fig. S1†) suggesting a different catalytic mechanism. The results clearly show that HER and CO<sub>2</sub>RR are both catalyzed by Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> electrodes and the outcome of the reduction can be tuned by the process conditions rather than by further catalyst modification.

#### **Durability and potential intermediates**

To further investigate the Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> bulk electrodes for its capability to act as a potent electrocatalyst in CO2RR, we performed stability tests in acetonitrile (24 ppm water H<sub>2</sub>O) at an applied potential of -1.8 V over 15 h (Fig. 3c). During the electrolysis, the system operated at a constant current density of around 3 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>. While in the beginning of the controlled potential electrolysis, high faradaic efficiencies of up to 87% CO are observed, it decreases slowly with electrolysis time to 75%. In equal measure, the FE for H<sub>2</sub> increases from 8 to 21%. This change in the CO:H2 selectivity can be caused by either an incremental change of the catalyst surface and hence its reactivity or an increase in water concentration over the course of the electrolysis. Notably, SEM-EDX showed only carbon deposition. The Fe:Ni:S content, however, is not affected, indicating high stability of the material. We subsequently quantified the water content after 15 h electrolysis and observed an elevated water concentration, responsible for the hampered catalyst performance. This increase most likely originates from traces of water present in the CO<sub>2</sub> stream causing accumulation of water in the electrolyte over time. To further evaluate the stability of Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub>, we performed long-time stability experiments in the presence of various amounts of water. Noteworthy, after conducting electrolysis at −1.8 V in a 5000 ppm water acetonitrile solution, the electrode is covered with a black film and correlates with the observed decrease of CO<sub>2</sub>RR activity. Energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) revealed a high carbon content of up to 80% at the electrode surface (Fig. S2†). While similar results were previously observed for Cu electrodes, 44 the exact reason of this electrode passivation, however, is not well understood and remains subject of future investigations.

Ex situ X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) measurements were carried out to reveal the composition and chemical state of the pentlandite catalysts as-prepared and after CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Both show a significant content of oxygen as it can be seen from the survey scans (Fig. S12†). Moreover, the sample after reaction bears considerably high amounts of the electrolyte residuals as indicated by intense F 1s, N 1s, and C 1s peaks. A closer investigation of the high-resolution regions of the metallic components (Fig. 4a and b) and sulfur (Fig. 5) confirms severe oxidation of the catalyst surface before and after the reaction and subsequent exposure to air. A spectral deconvolution of the Fe 2p<sub>3/2</sub> photoemission line using an Fe(III) multiplet structure<sup>45</sup> and a single  $FeS_x$  peak (Fig. 4c) indicates only 18 at% of the

Similarly, the Ni 2p<sub>3/2</sub> region is dominated by the Ni(OH)<sub>2</sub> structure<sup>46</sup> represented by a photoemission peak at 855.9 eV and a characteristic shake-up satellite at 861.4 eV (Fig. 4d). The peak at 853.0 eV represents a sulfide species and corresponds to  $\sim$ 23% of the total Ni content. XPS analysis of the sample after reaction does not display a significant change in the chemical state of Fe and Ni, although one needs to consider that both samples were measured ex situ and that at least partial catalyst reduction is expected under reaction conditions that can be further re-oxidized upon ex situ sample transfer in air. Moreover, calculation of the Fe: Ni ratio for the sulfide species, shows enrichment with nickel before and after reaction. The S 2p region of both samples shows a shape typical for Fe<sub>r</sub>Ni<sub>9-r</sub>S<sub>8</sub> materials<sup>25</sup> with a structure between 160-165 eV, characteristic of oxysulfide films,47 and a mildly oxidized iron pyrite surface. 48,49 The structure at higher binding energy is deconvoluted in two doublets, at 168.4-169.7 and 166.1-167.3 eV, representing sulfate and sulfite species correspondingly.50 The structure at higher binding energy is deconvoluted in two doublets, at 168.4-169.7 and 166.1-167.3 eV, representing sulfate and sulfite species, correspondingly. Remarkably, the amount of oxidic sulfur species increases from 17 to 50 at% after the reaction. Despite the high amount of oxidized species observed by XPS, we do not indent to identify those as active in

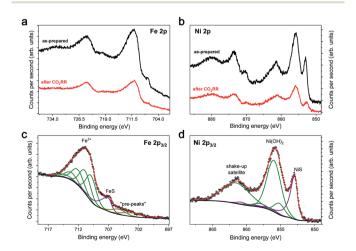


Fig. 4 (a) Fe 2p and (b) Ni 2p XPS spectra of pentlandite before and after CO<sub>2</sub>RR. Examples of the spectral deconvolution fit for the asprepared sample are shown in (c) for the Fe 2p<sub>3/2</sub> core level and (d) for Ni 2p<sub>3/2</sub>.

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as-prepared
as-prepared
as-prepared
Binding energy (eV)

asysulfide species

oxysulfide species

oxysulfide species

oxysulfide species

sold
supplied
species

oxysulfide species

sold
species

oxysulfide species

oxysulfide species

sold
species

sold
species

sold
species

species

oxysulfide species

species

oxysulfide species

sp

Fig. 5 S 2p XPS spectra of the pentlandite before and after  $CO_2RR$  (a) and spectral deconvolution exemplified for the as-prepared sample (b). The decrease in the intensity of the S signal observed after reaction is at least partially related to the overlayer resulting from electrolyte recidues.

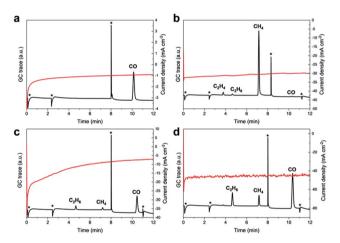


Fig. 6 GC traces and recorded current densities starting from different carbon sources like  $Cs_2CO_3$  (a), formaldehyde (b), oxalic acid (c) and formic acid (d).

the  $\mathrm{CO}_2\mathrm{RR}$ . Both Fe and Ni are well known to form native oxide overlayers upon exposure to air. However, the increased amount of oxidic sulfur species is striking. We attribute it to the formation of S defect sites under reaction conditions, which are then more prone to oxidation when exposed to air. Notably, such [NiFe]-oxido-species are also found in the natural archetype Ni-dehydrogenases and are discussed as key intermediates in the enzymatic  $\mathrm{CO}_2$  reduction.  $^{51,52}$ 

As copper is one of the benchmark materials in  $CO_2RR$ , we decided to compare  $Fe_{4.5}Ni_{4.5}S_8$  and a copper disc electrode under the same experimental conditions. CPC experiments at -1.2, -1.5 and -1.8 V  $\nu s$ . NHE were subsequently performed in acetonitrile (113 ppm  $H_2O$ ) (Fig. S3†). While we observed current densities of -0.14, -0.73 and -3.2 mA cm $^{-2}$  at -1.2, -1.5, and -1.8 V, respectively, for  $Fe_{4.5}Ni_{4.5}S_8$ , Cu bulk electrodes showed significantly smaller current densities of -0.01,

-0.10 and -0.28 mA cm<sup>-2</sup> under otherwise identical conditions (Fig. S3†). Analysis of the gaseous products after 1 hour at -1.2 V and -1.5 V, revealed significant higher HER activity of Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> with FEs of 34 and 51%, respectively, for H<sub>2</sub> in comparison to those observed for Cu bulk electrodes (0 and 6%). In lieu, Cu revealed higher efficiency towards methane formation with FE of 20 and 9% at -1.2 V and -1.5 V respectively versus the observed FE of 13 and 4% for Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> electrodes under identical conditions. Likewise, the efficiency for CO at Cu electrodes (FE 39%, -1.2 V; FE 9%, -1.5 V) is higher than observed for  $Fe_{4.5}Ni_{4.5}S_8$  (FE 11.4%, -1.2 V; FE 4%, -1.5 V). Notably, these differences are only observed at low current densities/low potentials. At -1.8 V, there is only a small difference in the product distribution. Both, Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> and Cu electrodes reveal suppressed H2 formation and facilitate the CO<sub>2</sub> reduction to mainly CO (72% FE for both electrodes) and traces of methane (1% FE for Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> and 6% FE for Cu). Notably, at such high potential conditions, Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> generally reveals higher current densities suggesting faster conversion kinetics and revealing its potential (Fig. S3†).

The overall narrow product distribution of  $Fe_{4.5}Ni_{4.5}S_8$  pointed our attention towards potential intermediates of the  $CO_2RR$  and their subsequent conversion on  $Fe_{4.5}Ni_{4.5}S_8$  bulk electrodes. We thus tested the reactivity of various potential  $CO_2$  reaction products, such as carbonate, CO, formaldehyde, formic acid and oxalic acid under electrocatalytic conditions (at -1.8 V  $\nu s$ . NHE) in acetonitrile containing 24 ppm water.

CPC in saturated Cs<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub> solutions (3.31 mM) in MeCN yielded exclusively CO as the major product (42% FE, Fig. 6a) and suggests that likewise, carbonates can serve as a CO2 source. In the presence of oxalic acid, the major reduction product is CO (FE 3.9%) and only trace amounts of hydrogenation to afford  $C_2H_4$  (FE 0.05%),  $C_2H_6$  (FE 1.60%) is also detected. Additionally, CO poisoning experiments were performed since Fe and Ni strongly adsorb CO and usually undergo surface deactivation. CPC experiments at −1.8 V vs. NHE in a solution of MeCN (24 ppm H<sub>2</sub>O, Fig. S4 and S5†) applying a continuously applied CO stream showed no obvious influence on the catalytic current and suggests no CO poisoning. Furthermore, neither gaseous nor liquid CO conversion products were detected, underlining the inertness of the Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub> electrodes towards further CO conversion. Under same conditions, a 37% formaldehyde solution afforded high amounts of CH<sub>4</sub> (FE 4.2%) and traces of C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> (FE 0.13%) and C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>6</sub> (FE 0.10%) (Fig. 6b). Notably, only negligible amounts of CO were observed herein. It is worth to highlight that C2-reduction products are observed in the presence of oxalic or formic acid (Fig. 6c and d) although with low efficiency (FE < 1%). Our results clearly show that although the formation of alternative reduction products seems possible, they will be converted to mainly CO and methane with a minor amount of C-C coupling products.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we have shown, that Fe<sub>4.5</sub>Ni<sub>4.5</sub>S<sub>8</sub>, much like its natural congeners, [FeNi]-hydrogenase and CODH<sub>Ni</sub>, can

catalyze HER as well as CO2RR depending on the chemical environment and with seemingly comparable catalytic intermediates. In this regard, protic electrolytes such as aqueous KHCO<sub>3</sub>, methanol as well as aprotic pyridine promote HER with high faradaic efficiency. In addition, utilizing the same electrodes in aprotic solvents such as acetonitrile, dimethyl formamide, dimethyl sulfoxide and propylene carbonate with welldefined water contents, CO2RR is favored over HER. Under such conditions, CO and methane are the main products with FE of up to 87% and 13%, respectively, at moderate current densities (ca. 3 mA cm<sup>-2</sup>). Our experiments clearly show that controlling the availability of protons in the chemical environment of the electrocatalyst is key towards successful CO<sub>2</sub>RR. While we are aware that water is the preferred electrolyte to perform such reduction reactions, our study shows that investigating potential CO<sub>2</sub>RR electrocatalysts in non-aqueous, can lead to the discovery of novel catalysts that operate under alternative reactions conditions (e.g. gas diffusion electrodes or in a pure gas stream). In addition, we herein show that the materials can facilitate the hydrogenation of nitriles with simple iron and nickel-based electrocatalysts.

## Conflicts of interest

**Chemical Science** 

There are no conflicts to declare.

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