Transmission Electron Microscopy at Atmospheric Pressure

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The ability to monitor dynamic processes in-situ is crucial for understanding structure-property relationships in nano-engineered materials. In the past decade, the majority of atomic-scale electron microscopy studies involving gas-solid interactions were conducted in an environmental transmission electron microscope (ETEM), where the gas pressure is typically limited to no more than 1/100 of at atmosphere. Recently, it has become possible to overcome this limitation through the use of a MEMS-based, electron-transparent closed cell with sample heating stage. In this talk, we illustrate the power of this device as applied to our study of two important catalyst systems: (1) the structural evolution of supported Pd@CeO2 and (2) the ordering and Pt surface enrichment in supported Pt3Co. For this work, we used the Protochips Atmosphere™ system [1], in which the sample is situated between two SiN windows, each of 30-50 nm in thickness, with a 5 um gap in between, in combination with a JEOL 3100R05 double aberration corrected transmission electron microscope (TEM) operating at 300kV in scanning mode.

Core–shell structures consisting of modular palladium-ceria core-shell subunits (Pd@CeO2), assembled in solution from discrete 2 nm crystallites of Pd and CeO2, then supported on silicon-functionalized alumina, have shown exceptional activity for methane combustion [2], attracting widespread interest from the catalysis community. In fact, we found that the sample actually consists of loosely assembled clusters of Pd and CeO2 nanoparticles (NPs), each ~2–3 nm in diameter, in close proximity after air calcination at 500 °C for 5 h. In-situ observations performed in 150 Torr of O2 subsequently revealed that an unexpected structural transformation occurs upon further heating at temperatures between 500 and 800 °C. As the temperature was increased above 500 °C, atoms on the corners of smaller CeO2 NPs started to leave the NPs, causing them to shrink, while atom ‘clouds’ simultaneously began to form, as shown in Figure 1. As the temperature of the sample was increased toward 650 °C, contraction of the cloud, accompanied by the growth of the surrounding CeO2 NPs was observed. Eventually, the system reached a stable state, where large CeO2 NPs, ~5-10 nm in diameter, together with very small entities, ~1-2 nm across, are both present in the sample. It seems that the newly formed structure, comprised of an intimate mixture of palladium, cerium, silicon, and oxygen with extremely high dispersion, is more likely to account for the exceptional catalytic properties that have been reported.

Another core-shell structured NP, having a thin Pt shell and a non-noble metal core (Fe, Co, Ni, etc.), is a promising oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) catalyst in polymer electrolyte membrane fuel cells. To better understand the formation process of the Pt shell, which is crucial for enhancing ORR activity, we investigated carbon-supported Pt3Co catalysts by in-situ electron microscopy, combined with first principle calculations. The disordered alloy was found to transform to an ordered intermetallic after high temperature (750 °C) annealing in 760 Torr of O2, followed by layer-by-layer Pt shell growth on (100) surfaces at low temperature (300 °C), as shown in Figure 2. The apparent “anti-oxidation” phenomenon
promoted by the ordered Pt₃Co phase is favorable to the ORR catalyst, which functions in an oxidizing environment. [3]

References:
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Figure 1 Sequential Scanning Transmission Electron Microscopy (STEM) images showing the dissociation of 2–3 nm CeO₂ NPs and the formation of atom ‘clouds’ during in-situ heating at just above 500 °C in 150 Torr O₂.

Figure 2 Sequential in-situ STEM images (taken inside the gas cell under O₂ at atmospheric pressure, at temperatures in the range of 700-750 °C) showing an oxygen-driven core-shell formation process in ordered Pt₃Co NPs.