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Electroreduction of CO$_2$ on Single-Site Copper-Nitrogen-Doped Carbon Material: Selective Formation of Ethanol and Reversible Restructuration of the Metal Sites


Abstract: It is generally believed that CO$_2$ electroreduction to multi-carbon products such as ethanol or ethylene may be catalyzed with significant yield only on metallic copper surfaces, implying large ensembles of copper atoms. Here, we report on an inexpensive Cu-N-C material prepared via a simple pyrolytic route that exclusively feature single copper atoms with a CuN coordination environment, atomically dispersed in a nitrogen-doped conductive carbon matrix. This material achieves aqueous CO$_2$ electroreduction to ethanol at a Faradaic yield of 55% under optimized conditions (electrolyte: 0.1 M CsHCO$_3$, potential: -1.2V vs. RHE and gas-phase recycling set up), as well as CO electroreduction to C$_2$-products (ethanol and ethylene) with a Faradaic yield of 80%. During electrolysis the isolated sites transiently convert into metallic copper nanoparticles, as shown by operando XAS analysis, which are likely to be the catalytically active species. Remarkably, this process is reversible and the initial material is recovered intact after electrolysis.

Introduction

The conversion of CO$_2$ to multi-carbon products is currently one of the most promising approaches to valorize CO$_2$ as fuels or chemical feedstocks. This may be achieved in electrolyzers via the electrochemical CO$_2$ reduction reaction (CO$_2$RR), providing the opportunity to store renewable but intermittent electric energy (sun, wind) as chemical fuels or other high-added-value products. Copper-based materials were early identified as catalysts that efficiently promote CO$_2$RR in aqueous conditions to C$_2$-products such as ethylene and ethanol. Recent years have witnessed numerous studies on such electrode materials, reaching Faradaic yields (FY) for multi-carbon products as high as 60%.[2] Alcohols are desirable CO$_2$RR products, in particular ethanol, owing to their high energy-densities and ease of separation from the unreacted CO$_2$ gas stream. However, catalysts promoting alcohol production with high selectivity are still extremely rare.[2a,b,3] Strategies to increase the selectivity of metallic-copper surfaces towards multi-carbon products are emerging through tailoring the surface properties of copper electrodes, either using a second metal[2k,4] or controlled oxidation[2a,5] or nanostructuration.[6] Alternatively, single-site catalysts have shown high CO$_2$RR activity and selectivity, however only afford single-carbon compounds, such as CO, methane or methanol as major products.[7]

Herein, we disclose the synthesis, characterisation and CO$_2$RR activity of a copper-nitrogen co-doped carbon material (Cu-N-C) presenting well-defined isolated CuN$_x$ sites covalently integrated into an amorphous carbon matrix (Fig. 1a). This material shows high selectivity for ethanol production in aqueous conditions, with a FY up to 55%. We demonstrate that ethanol is the sole liquid-phase product of CO$_2$RR and that CO is a key reaction intermediate in this process, as evidenced by the ability of the material to catalyse the electroreduction of CO to ethanol with a FY over 65%. In addition, while ex-situ characterization of the material after electrolysis shows a structure identical to the starting material with only isolated CuN$_x$ sites, operando X-ray absorption (XAS) results clearly evidenced a restructuring of the material under electrocatalytic conditions, via partial and transient conversion of CuN$_x$ sites into Cu nanoparticles. Indeed, this is reversible since the latter convert back to CuN$_x$ sites after electrolysis.

Results and Discussion

Synthesis and characterization of the Cu-N-C single-site material
Pyrolytic synthesis has been identified as an effective route to produce atomically-dispersed metal ions coordinated to nitrogen atoms within carbon matrices \[\text{[8]}\]. By analogy to the synthetic routes developed for Fe-N-C materials used in O\(_2\) electroreduction and CO\(_2\)RR\[\text{[7e, 8]}\], we successfully synthesized a single-site Cu-N-C material via a two-step strategy: (i) dry-phase mixing of a Zn based zeolitic imidazolate framework (ZIF-8) with Cu(II) chloride and phenanthroline ligand via low-energy ball-milling; (ii) pyrolysis of the resulting catalyst precursor powder at 1050 °C under Ar flow. We prepared the material Cu\(_{65}\)NC, comprising 0.5\%\textsubscript{calc} Cu at step (i), which resulted in 1.4\%\textsubscript{wt} Cu after pyrolysis as determined by elemental analysis (the increase in Cu %\textsubscript{wt} is due to ZIF-8 forming volatile products).

A very small amount (< 0.02\%\textsubscript{wt}) of Zn, derived from ZIF-8, was also present as determined by Inductively Coupled Plasma – Atomic Emission Spectroscopy (ICP-AES). X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) of Cu\(_{65}\)NC showed Cu 2p\(_{3/2}\) peaks at 932.5 and 935.0 eV and a Cu-Auger line with a maximum at 569.0 eV (Figure S1), indicating +II is the predominant Cu oxidation state.

The analysis of the N 1s region revealed the presence of pyridinic (398.6 eV), pyrrolic (401.0 eV), graphic (402.6 eV) and porphyrin-like N-Cu signals (399.7 eV), analogous to that which is typically observed with Metal-N-C materials (Figure S1) \[\text{[7s, 7t]}\]. The presence of Zn was also confirmed by XPS analysis (Figure S1). At 10 K Cu\(_{65}\)NC displayed a continuous-wave electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) spectrum with a broad signal centered at \(g = 2.07\), typical for a Cu\(^{2+}\); \(d^9\) S=1/2 state (Figure 1b). Hyperfine coupling was not observed, probably due to the exchange interaction within the graphitic sheets. The threshold energy of the Cu K-edge X-ray absorption fine-edge structure (XANES) spectrum of Cu\(_{65}\)NC is 8983.8 eV, similar to that of a Cu(II)-phthalocyanine molecular analogue (8984.6 eV). This further supports a predominant +II oxidation state of the Cu centers (Figure S2-S4). The Cu K-edge extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) analysis of Cu\(_{65}\)NC is shown in Figure 1c and Figure S5. Fitting this spectrum with Cu-N and Cu-C scattering paths from the nearest neighbors reveals the presence of four N atoms at 1.95(1) Å from the Cu center, in agreement with values determined by EXAFS on copper-porphyrin \[\text{[5]}\]. The Cu\(_N\) sites are integrated in the graphitic matrix, as revealed by the need for two shells of Cu-C scattering path at 3.10(2) and 3.36(2) Å (See Table S1) to properly fit the EXAFS spectrum. In addition, the absence of intense peaks at ca. 2.3 Å in the Fourier-transformed spectrum (Figure S6), characteristic for Cu-Cu scattering paths, suggests the absence of copper clusters. The absence of crystalline copper in our material was further confirmed by (i), powder X-ray diffraction of the material (Figure S7), revealing only two broad reflection peaks typical for nano-sized graphitic platelets in amorphous carbon materials \[\text{[7s]}\] and (ii), transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images showing amorphous carbon structures and no copper clusters (Figure S8). To gain deeper insight into the copper dispersion, atomic-resolution high-angle annular dark-field scanning transmission electron microscopy (HAADF-STEM) images of Cu\(_{65}\)NC were captured. These images (Figure 1d and Figure S9) show the presence of multiple bright dots of atomic size, corresponding to isolated Cu atoms, as confirmed by electron energy loss spectroscopy at these sites (Figure S9b).

**Figure 1.** Structural and morphological characterization of Cu\(_{65}\)NC. (a) Schematic representation; (b) EPR spectrum recorded at 10 K of Cu\(_{65}\)NC diluted in an amorphous silica matrix; (c) Cu K-edge EXAFS analysis in the Fourier-transformed space; (d) HAADF-STEM image.

**CO\(_2\) electrocatalytic reduction**

Cu\(_{65}\)NC was then evaluated for electrocatalytic CO\(_2\) reduction after deposition on a carbon-based gas-diffusion layer (GDL) with a Nation\textsuperscript{®} perfluorinated resin binder. The latter served to stabilize the deposit but had no effect on the activity. The deposit did not significantly alter the morphology of the GDL layer, as shown by scanning electron microscopy (Figure S10). The electrode was initially investigated by controlled-potential electrolysis (CPE) at potentials ranging from −0.5 to −1.0 V (all potentials are indicated vs. RHE) under standard ‘static headspace’ conditions, i.e. in a closed cell, under a CO\(_2\) atmosphere, containing CO\(_2\)-saturated 0.1 M aqueous solutions of various alkali bicarbonates (Li, Na, K, Cs). Linear sweep voltammograms (LSVs), CO production rates and current variation during electrolysis are reported in Figure S11-S16. As shown in Figure 2a and 2b, CO and H\(_2\) were identified as the major reaction products, with the FY for CO, FY(CO), reaching a maximum at different potentials depending on the electrolyte (47 % at −0.8 V for LiHCO\(_3\), 58 % at −0.7 V for NaHCO\(_3\), 64 % at −0.6 V for KHCO\(_3\) and 74 % at −0.6 V for CaHCO\(_3\)). The maximum FY(CO) increased with increasing the size of the cation in the order Li\(^+\)<Na\(^+\)<K\(^+\)<Cs\(^+\). While this had been previously observed with metallic electrodes (Au, Ag, Cu, Hg), \[\text{[10]}\] it had not yet been reported for Metal-N\(_x\)-based or other carbon-supported catalysts. FY(H\(_2\)) increased at the expense of FY(CO) upon scanning towards more cathodic potentials. This can be
explained by considering the mass transport of the reactants. Indeed, the CO$_2$ concentration at the electrode surface decreases drastically with increasing current densities due to CO$_2$ consumption and stronger gas evolution from the electrode (which sparges the solution from CO$_2$) and as such protons become the dominant substrate due to their higher concentration in the bulk and higher diffusion coefficient. In this respect, the CsHCO$_3$ electrolyte is clearly unique since its H$_2$ production did not significantly increase below −0.7 V. Such an effect has been attributed to the stronger cation hydration of Cs$^+$, reducing the cation-specific adsorption on the cathode and limiting H$_2$ production.[11] Additionally, we observed a total FY for all gas-phase products well below 100% at electrode concentrations below −0.9 V, indicating the formation of liquid phase products, in particular trace amounts of ethanol (Figure S12b). The very limited amount of CO$_2$ in the CO$_2$-saturated aqueous solution under static CO$_2$ atmosphere together with a degassing of the electrolyte due to the formation of gaseous products at such negative potentials however greatly restrict the formation of more complex multi-carbon products. This led us to modify the operating conditions in a second step of the investigation. Indeed, to prevent CO$_2$ depletion during electrolysis and reach higher FY for such multi-carbon products, we thus carried out the catalytic tests under ‘flow’ conditions, providing a constant CO$_2$ supply to the electrolyte (10 mL/min), in 0.1 M CsHCO$_3$ as the electrolyte.

CPE was carried out during one hour at potentials ranging from −1.0 V to −1.3 V, analyzing the gaseous products by on-line gas chromatography and the liquid phase products by quantitative $^1$H NMR and ionic chromatography. Remarkably, ethanol was the sole product found in liquid phase at these potentials, while H$_2$ and CO were the only detected gas-phase products (Figure S17–S18). The highest FY(EtOH) was obtained at −1.2 V (Figure S19). We further optimized the system by investigating the effect of CO$_2$ flow-rate on the electrolysis production, while keeping the potential fixed at −1.2 V. A maximum FY(EtOH) of 43% was found for a flow rate of 2.5 mL/min with a high and stable average current density of 16.2 mA/cm$^2$ (Figure 2c, Figure S20 and Table S2). At this optimized flow rate, the FY(EtOH) increased at all the potentials between −1.0 V and −1.3 V with respect to the catalytic test carried out at 10 mL/min flow rate, but the optimal potential remained at −1.2 V (Figure 2d). It should be noted that the FY for CO and H$_2$ did not vary during the electrolysis (Figure S18). As a reference material, the parent copper-free nitrogen-doped carbon material prepared identically, except for the absence of copper chloride in the precursor mixture, did not show any ethanol production (Figure S21). This demonstrated that the Zn atoms are not active in ethanol production. Whether such a low amount of Zn present on the material could nevertheless combine with Cu to provide the observed selectivity seems unlikely. Indeed, recent ZnCu alloys were reported to catalyze the electroreduction of CO$_2$, however exclusively into a mixture of CO and H$_2$ with no ethanol production[13] and Cu$_x$Zn oxide catalysts were shown to produce ethanol, in addition to CO and H$_2$, however with an important co-production of ethylene.[24] To confirm that CO$_2$ constituted the carbon source for ethanol, we carried out the catalytic test using $^{13}$C labeled CO$_2$ (−1.2 V, 2.5 mL/min CO$_2$). The $^1$H and $^{13}$C NMR of the liquid phase after 1 h electrolysis revealed the quantitative $^{13}$C labeling of ethanol (Figure S22–S23), validating that ethanol originates from CO$_2$ reduction. Finally, under optimized conditions (−1.2 V, 2.5 mL/min CO$_2$, Figure 2e) the larger cations again favored ethanol production with FY(EtOH) increasing in the order Li$^+$ (2%) < Na$^+$ (5%) < K$^+$ (16%) < Cs$^+$ (43%).

As for many CO$_2$ reduction catalysts, the Tafel plot for Cu$_2$ZnNC is complex and the Tafel slope is strongly potential-dependent. We hence expressed the Tafel slopes resulting from the specific partial current densities of the different products. A Tafel slope of 175 mV/decade could be measured between −0.4 and −0.6 V applied potential for CO$_2$, as derived from “static headspace” experiments and a Tafel slope of 311 mV/decade for EtOH was estimated from “flow” experiments between −1.1 and −1.2 V applied potential (Figure S24). These different values suggest that the two reactions have different rate determining steps. In addition, the Tafel slope measured for ethanol is significantly higher than the slope of 120 mV/decade typically observed when the rate-determining step is a reductive coupling of adsorbed CO intermediates on metallic electrodes.[8] Relatively large overpotential at 1 mA/cm$^2$ of 1 V was determined by Tafel-slope analysis of the partial current for ethanol. This value is in the range of the overpotentials observed with Cu foil in similar conditions.

Figure 2. Faradaic yields of CO$_2$RR on Cu$_2$ZnNC. Faradaic yields of (a) CO and (b) H$_2$ under ‘static headspace’ conditions after 10 minutes of CPE, in 0.1 M CO$_2$-saturated aqueous solutions of various alkali bicarbonates. Faradaic yields of CO$_2$RR under ‘flow’ conditions after 1 h of CPE: (c) at −1.2 V vs. RHE in a 0.1 M CsHCO$_3$ aqueous solution under various flow rates of CO$_2$. (d) at 2.5 mL/min CO$_2$-flow rate in 0.1 M CsHCO$_3$ aqueous solution, at various applied potentials during CPE. (e) at −1.2 V vs. RHE and 2.5 mL/min flow rate of CO$_2$ in 0.1 M aqueous solution, using various electrolyte cations. Faradaic yields of CO$_2$ reduction products after 1 h CPE at −1.2 V vs. RHE under 2.5 mL/min flow of CO in 0.1 M CsHCO$_3$ are reported on the right-hand side of Figure 2 (e).
reaction conditions[24] but our catalyst shows a much narrower product distribution.

Assuming that CO is the most probable first reaction intermediate in the ethanol formation mechanism, we reasoned that the lower selectivity of Cu$_2$O:NC for ethanol production at high CO flow-rates could be explained by a decrease of local CO concentration at the electrode surface caused by the increased sparging. We hence carried out CPE using Cu$_2$O:NC in 0.1 M CsHCO$_3$ aqueous solution at $-1.2$ V for 1 hour with a continuous 2.5 mL/min flow of CO (Figure S25). A stable current density of about 12 mA/cm$^2$ was observed and a FY(EtOH) of 66% was obtained, confirming that higher FY(EtOH) could be obtained if the CO concentration was increased (Figure 2e).

Minor amounts of ethylene and methane were also observed. This high FY for CO reduction to ethanol encouraged us to explore the recycling of the gas phase during CO$_2$RR, as significant amounts of CO were formed and could be further converted to ethanol. We hence carried out CPE at $-1.2$ V for 1 hour using a closed CO$_2$ volume of 300 mL cycled through the electrolyzer at a flow of 2.5 mL/min (Figure S26). In this setup the FY(EtOH) increased to 55%, with a concomitant decrease of FY for CO, in agreement with the favored reduction of CO to ethanol. In these conditions, methane was also identified as a minor product (Figure S27).

**Ex-situ and operando characterization of the material**

Ex-situ characterization of Cu$_2$O:NC after electrolysis did not show any evidence for the presence of metallic copper nanoparticles: (i) no Cu nanoparticles could be observed in TEM images (Figure S28); (ii) no Cu$^0$ signal was detected in the XPS spectrum (Figure S29) and the XANES spectrum (Figure S30) either; (iii) no characteristic Cu-Cu feature from metallic copper or copper oxides could be observed in the Fourier Transform (FT) of the EXAFS spectrum which revealed that the material only contained CuN$_x$ sites before and after electrolysis (Figure S31). However, the ex-situ observation of isolated CuN$_x$ moieties may not be sufficient to conclude that these are the catalytic sites per se. In particular, recent studies of molecular Cu-phthalocyanine catalysts showed that very small metallic Cu nanoparticles formed in-situ during CO$_2$ electrolysis, however in a reversible way[14]. Whether such a behavior also occurs in the case of the CuN$_x$ sites of Cu$_2$O:NC was studied by XAS in operando electrolysis conditions (Figure S32). Analysis of the XANES spectra at the copper K-edge of the material under electrocatalytic conditions revealed a shift in the edge position from 8983.93 eV to 8979.2 eV for applied potentials below $-0.6$ V vs. RHE, indicative of a change of the Cu oxidation state from +II to 0 (the metallic copper K-edge energy position is indeed 8979 eV, see Figures 3, S3-S4). Consistently, Cu K-edge FT-EXAFS spectra of Cu$_2$O:NC recorded under operating conditions demonstrated the appearance of a Cu-Cu coordination, showing that metallic copper nanoparticles extensively form under electrocatalytic conditions, even when moderate potentials (from $-0.6$ V vs. RHE) were applied.

In agreement with XANES data, the FT-EXAFS spectrum thus clearly indicated that Cu was essentially in the form of nanoparticles after prolonged electrolysis at $-1.2$ V vs. RHE (green spectrum Figure 3d), even though a very small peak at around 1.5 Å was indicative of Cu atoms coordinated with light atoms (C, N, O). It is thus very likely that these nanoparticles are the catalytically active species. Nitrogen-doped carbon-supported Cu nanoparticles have been previously reported as highly active for the CO$_2$RR to ethanol.[19]

The mean size of these particles can be estimated by using EXAFS coordination numbers (CNs) and mean interatomic distances applying an equation valid for homogeneous spherical nanoclusters.[16] The details of the fitting procedure are provided in the experimental section. The best-fit analysis and the structural parameters obtained for Cu$_2$O:NC at $-1.2$ V are reported in Figure S33 and Table S3, respectively, and compared to the crystalline Cu results. The estimated size of the Cu nanoparticles, by means of Cu-Cu first shell parameters, is 0.47±0.04 nm. While the coordination numbers obtained by the EXAFS analysis are probably underestimated, because a very small fraction of Cu is coordinated with light atoms, the experimental EXAFS spectrum can be correctly reproduced with Cu-Cu contributions only. The correction to be made to the CNs is small and affecting the particle size determination only marginally (e.g., for a system containing 20% of non-metallic Cu, which is a non-negligible fraction, the particle size estimation would be 0.53±0.05 nm).

Intrigued by the exclusive presence of CuN$_x$ sites in the ex-situ post electrolysis samples, we exposed the material used for the operando XAS measurements to air and, using XAS characterization, observed the disappearance of the metallic copper phase and the restoration of the original spectra (Figure 3 c-d). The same behavior occurred when the potential of the electrode was switched back to $+1$ V vs. RHE, after electrolysis at $-1.2$ V. RHE. This full structural reversibility operates upon multiple reduction/oxidation cycles. ICP measurement of Cu in the electrolyte upon cycling confirmed the absence of dissolved Cu, consistent with a quantitative binding of Cu in CuN$_x$ sites upon application of positive potentials. This is likely the consequence of the small size of the particles and the strong Cu(II)-chelating capacity of the N$_x$ sites of the material.
**Figure 3. Operando XAS characterization of Cu$_2$N$_2$C at the Cu-K edge.** (a) K-edge XANES spectra of Cu$_2$N$_2$C under no potential applied (blue line). Cu$_2$N$_2$C during electrolysis at $-0.6$ V vs. RHE (pink line), at $-0.7$ V vs. RHE (green line), at $-1.2$ V vs. RHE (red line) and metallic copper (black line). (b) Fourier transform of the experimental EXAFS spectra of Cu$_2$N$_2$C under no potential applied (blue line). Cu$_2$N$_2$C during electrolysis at $-0.6$ V vs. RHE (pink line), at $-0.7$ V vs. RHE (green line) at $-1.2$ V vs. RHE (red line) and metallic copper (black line). (c) Comparison between the K-edge XANES experimental spectrum of Cu$_2$N$_2$C under no potential applied (blue line), Cu$_2$N$_2$C during electrolysis at $-1.2$ V vs. RHE (red line) after electrolysis under no potential applied (green line) and Cu$_2$N$_2$C after electrolysis at $-1.2$ V vs. RHE then sample exposed to air (orange line) (d) Fourier transform of the experimental EXAFS spectra of Cu$_2$N$_2$C under no potential applied (blue line), Cu$_2$N$_2$C during electrolysis at $-1.2$ V vs. RHE (red line), after electrolysis under no potential applied (green line). 

**Conclusion**

The novel material reported herein demonstrated the amenability of isolated copper CuN$_2$ sites as precursors for highly active catalysts for CO$_2$ electroreduction to ethanol. It is unique in allowing formation of ethanol as the **only** liquid product, reaching Faradaic yields as high as 55%. Optimization of the electrocatalytic conditions illustrated the importance of the electrolyte cation and the CO$_2$ flow-rate on the catalytic selectivity for EtOH formation. As shown in Table S4, these Faradic yields for ethanol are among the highest reported ones using Cu-based electrocatalysts. Operando XAS experiments established the conversion of the CuN$_2$ sites into very small metallic Cu nanoparticles during electrolysis. The latter are likely to be the catalytically active species, displaying a unique reactivity. Further studies of this material are required to understand the high selectivity observed. Interestingly, in the present case, the restructuring behavior is reversible which makes the material also a very stable catalyst. This study thus illustrates that extreme care must be taken before concluding on the nature of the active sites in such single-atom catalysts, even at very low metal loading. By demonstrating that the generation of multi-carbon products with high selectivity is possible using such site-isolated inexpensive material, this work paves the way towards new approaches to CO$_2$ electroreduction using single-site material precursors for improved selectivity and efficiency.

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**Keywords:** CO$_2$ electroreduction • copper • single-site catalyst • ethanol • operando analysis


Trace amount of acetate – below 3.5% FE – were observed when using 13CO2 (Figure S23-S24). The 13CO2 used in this study was analyzed and shown to contain significant amounts of O2, CO and methane. Poisoning of some surface sites or undesired side-reaction with these impurities potentially explains the presence of this trace acetate by-product in the liquid phase.


