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The effect of the reduction temperature on the structure of Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts for methanol synthesis

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Abstract: The structure of Cu/SiO₂ and Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts was studied after reduction at 450-1300 K. The influence of the ZnO promoter on the exposed Cu surface area and metal cluster size was determined by N₂O chemisorption and X-ray diffraction. After reduction at 450 K, the metal surface area amounted to 9 m²/g_{cat} for both catalysts. Oxygen uptake during N₂O chemisorption increased significantly up to reduction temperatures of 800-900 K. This increase was most prominent for the ZnO-promoted catalyst, although no oxygen uptake was observed for a similarly treated ZnO/SiO₂ sample. The behaviour of the promoted catalyst can be explained by formation of Zn⁰, surface alloying, and segregation of ZnO_x species on top of Cu clusters. The high thermostability of the catalysts was confirmed by in-situ XRD measurements. The Cu crystallite size in both catalysts was about 4 nm, and did not increase when the reduction temperature was raised to 1100 K for 1 hour.

Key Words: methanol synthesis; Cu/ZnO catalysts; Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts; N₂O chemisorption; surface characterization; surface oxidation state; surface structure

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1. INTRODUCTION

Contradictory views exist on the nature of active sites and the role of promoters in (supported) Cu/ZnO catalysts, which are widely used in the water gas shift reaction, ester hydrogenolysis, and both methanol synthesis and decomposition. Three main theories may be distinguished concerning the active state of copper in Cu/ZnO based catalysts for methanol synthesis, viz. Cu^0 , Cu^{1+} and a Cu/Zn alloy [1-3]. Depending on the gas phase and temperature, dynamic behaviour of the structure has been observed for which various models have been developed [4]: wetting/non-wetting phenomena of ZnO by metallic Cu [5], flat epitaxial Cu particles on top of ZnO balanced by dissolved protons [6], and coverage of Cu particles or mixed oxide by ZnO [7].

Brands et al. found that supported Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts reduced at high temperature exhibited a profound increase in the rate of methanol synthesis, as well as ester hydrogenolysis [8]. The conclusion from this and other work [9-11] is that the Cu-ZnO interface is crucial for the activation of carbonyl functions towards hydrogenation, possibly involving stabilisation of Cu^{1+} [4]. In a recent Low Energy Ion Scattering study, Jansen et al. reported that the surface composition of a similar $^{63}\text{Cu}/^{68}\text{ZnO}/\text{SiO}_2$ catalyst depends strongly on the applied reduction temperature [7]. Some ZnO enrichment of the surface was found after reduction at 473 K, while at 673 K virtually all Cu clusters were covered with partly reduced ZnO_x species ($0 < x < 1$). Consequently, the exposed Cu surface area is expected to be diminished due to shielding of metallic Cu by ZnO_x . This decrease was not observed by Brands et al., who established a typical Cu surface area of $20 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}_{\text{cat}}$ by N_2O chemisorption [8].

Although the catalytic activity of Cu/ZnO based catalysts is found to correlate nicely with N_2O chemisorption data [12], Berndt et al. have shown that N_2O chemisorption may overestimate the Cu surface area due to oxidation of partially reduced ZnO [13], and/or

hydrogen dissolved in the ZnO matrix [14]. Contrarily, Jung et al. found that ZnO in the presence of Cu was not reduced by H₂ below 723 K [15]. Therefore, more information is needed on the question how Cu/ZnO interaction at different reduction temperatures influences chemisorption by the Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ system. Since Brands et al. found a substantial rise in methanol synthesis activity with reduction temperature for ZnO-promoted catalysts and a modest methanol yield for Cu/SiO₂ catalysts [4, 16], a comparison between promoted and unpromoted catalysts is especially important.

In view of the above, the questions we want to address in this study concern (i) the structure of Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts, i.e. the size and morphology of Cu nanoparticles and the nature of the Cu/ZnO interface, and (ii) the correctness of the N₂O chemisorption method to establish the Cu surface area. To these ends we applied TG and N₂O chemisorption combined with XRD and HR-TEM measurements on Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ and Cu/SiO₂ systems reduced in the temperature range of 450-1300 K, i.e. well beyond the reduction temperature of 750 K established for maximal activity [8, 16]. Silica supported catalysts are well suited to investigate Cu/ZnO interaction, because of the large surface area and the relatively mild chemical interaction with Cu and ZnO as compared to alumina. The loading of the support was chosen in conformity with the composition of the highly active catalyst for ester hydrogenolysis and methanol synthesis investigated previously [11]. Moreover, the low Cu loading guarantees that sintering of the metal particles can be ruled out as much as possible.

2. EXPERIMENTAL

Promoted and unpromoted silica supported copper catalysts were prepared by homogeneous deposition precipitation of copper nitrate trihydrate (Merck, > 99.5% pure) and zinc nitrate hexahydrate (Janssen, > 98% pure) onto Aerosil 200 silica (Degussa), according to the method described by Van der Grift et al. [17]. The precipitate was washed twice with

doubly distilled water and dried at 363 K overnight. Subsequently, the precipitate was crushed and sieved to obtain the required size of the silica particles of 125-212 μm .

The metal loading of the prepared catalysts was determined by inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectroscopy (ICP-AES) and amounted to Cu/SiO₂ (12.9 ± 0.5 wt % Cu) and Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ (12.9 ± 0.5 wt % Cu, 4.8 ± 0.2 wt % Zn).

XRD measurements were carried out by means of Cu K α radiation ($\lambda = 0.154$ nm) using a curved position-sensitive Philips CPS-120 diffractometer equipped with a high temperature reaction cell. This set-up enabled in-situ reduction of the catalysts in a 5% H₂/He flow at elevated temperatures up to 1300 K; the heating rate was 50 K/min. Samples were mounted on a Pt-plate with special glue. After background subtraction and correction for instrumental broadening, the peak width and diffraction angle 2θ were used to calculate the average crystallite size d [18]:

$$d = 0.94\lambda / \Delta(2\theta) \cdot \cos\theta$$

with λ the x-ray wavelength, and $\Delta(2\theta)$ the full-width at half-maximum in radians.

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) and electron diffraction were performed using a Philips CM30UT electron microscope operated at 300 kV. In this microscope, energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) elemental analysis was carried out by means of a LINK EDX system.

Calcination, reduction and chemisorption of the catalysts were carried out in a Setaram TG-85 thermobalance to monitor all treatments; after each step the thermobalance was evacuated for 15 minutes. Samples of about 200 mg were placed into a porous basket and calcined in a flow of 2 cm³/s dry air at 750 K for 12 hours. Then the samples were heated in a flow of 2 cm³/s 66% H₂/Ar with 72 K/h to the required reduction temperature, kept at this temperature for 1 hour, and finally allowed to cool down to 363 K in the flowing reducing gas.

The sample weight during temperature programmed reduction was corrected for the changing gas density by subtracting the baseline obtained during the subsequent cool-down. Differential thermogravimetric (DTG) profiles were calculated by differentiation of the corrected thermobalance data with time to include the 1 h hold-period; the obtained values are plotted against the temperature. Corrections were made for the temperature-dependency of the buoyancy.

Copper surface areas were determined by N₂O chemisorption [19], following the gravimetric method described by Luys et al. [20]. During dissociative chemisorption of N₂O by the catalyst an oxidic layer is formed, according to the reaction:

where Cu_s denotes a Cu surface site. Chemisorption was performed in a flow of 2 cm³/s 1% N₂O/99% Ar at 363 K during 50 minutes, and the amount of oxygen consumed was determined from the weight gain of the sample. The copper surface area was calculated by linear extrapolation of the subsurface contribution to t = 0 [20], assuming Cu_s/O_{ads} = 2, and a value of 1.46·10¹⁹ Cu_s atoms/m² [21]. Since for the promoted catalyst partial reduction of ZnO is expected during high temperature reduction [13], oxygen uptake during N₂O chemisorption is expressed as 'metal surface area' in this study. The typical error in metal surface areas is about 5%. After chemisorption, the treated samples are denoted as passivated.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. X-ray diffraction

X-ray diffraction was employed to identify crystalline phases (Fig. 1) and to determine the crystallite size of supported particles (Fig. 2). The calcined samples show no sharp diffraction peaks, demonstrating that after calcination the catalysts either have an amorphous

structure or the size of the crystallites is smaller than the XRD detection limit. Subsequently, the calcined samples were reduced in-situ at temperatures ranging from 500-1300 K.

The unpromoted Cu/SiO₂ catalyst reduced at 500 K exhibits two main peaks that can be assigned to Cu⁰ (111) at $2\theta \approx 43.3^\circ$ and Cu⁰ (200) at $2\theta \approx 50.5^\circ$ (Fig. 1a). The corresponding crystallite dimensions amount to ca. 4 and 3 nm, respectively (Fig. 2). Assuming the (111) plane parallel to the support [22], the slightly flattened particle shape would be indicative of a relatively weak interaction with the silica support. The Cu⁰ peaks become more intense at reduction temperatures of 600-700 K when amorphous copper oxide is reduced quantitatively (see section 3.3). From the stable crystallite size within a deviation of ± 0.2 nm in the 600-1100 K range, it may be inferred that sintering of the Cu particles can be excluded as well. Only after reduction at 1100 K the width of the Cu⁰ peaks decreases, while the intensities become slightly higher. At the highest employed temperature of 1300 K, the calculated mean crystallite size amounts to ca. 6 nm. We conclude that for the unpromoted catalyst the Cu phase starts to grow by sintering of smaller crystallites after reduction at 1100 K.

The promoted Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst reduced at 500 K shows the same Cu⁰ peaks, while no distinct crystalline ZnO phase (strongest line $2\theta \approx 36.2^\circ$) was observed (Fig. 1b). When the reduction temperature was raised to 600 K the Cu crystallite size increased from 2.8 to 4.2 nm (Fig. 2), which may be related to partial crystallisation of amorphous Cu species. This finding is in good agreement with the dispersion ratio of 1.4 established by LEIS at 473-573 K [7]. The size of the Cu crystallites up to reduction temperatures of 900 K appears rather constant (Fig. 2), the Cu⁰ (111) plane being about 0.6 nm larger than the Cu⁰ (200) plane. The digression encountered at 1000 K, which was found to be reproducible, is indicative of the formation of more spherical particles, and will be addressed in section 3.5.

Like the Cu/SiO₂ catalyst, the Cu crystallites of the promoted Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst were also found to grow at 1100 K.

Following reduction at 800 K and passivation, Cu/SiO₂ and Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts were exposed to a flow of 2 cm³/s dry air at 363 K in the thermobalance during 30 minutes. After 5 minutes of air exposure, the weight of the Cu/SiO₂ sample reached a constant value that corresponded to the complete bulk oxidation of metallic Cu to Cu₂O. The XRD pattern of this oxidised sample only contained Cu¹⁺ peaks of the (111) and (200) planes at $2\theta \approx 36.4^\circ$ and 42.3° , respectively (Fig. 3). Although not unexpected, it can be concluded that N₂O passivation does not protect Cu particles from further oxidation by air at 363 K.

Interestingly, a completely different result was obtained for the ZnO-promoted system. The passivated and aerated Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ sample still exhibited the familiar Cu⁰ (111) and Cu⁰ (200) peaks, while only a small Cu¹⁺ (111) peak was obtained as compared to the unpromoted catalyst (Fig. 3). This strongly suggests that the majority of the metallic Cu particles in the ZnO-promoted catalyst was shielded from oxidation by air at 363 K. Most likely this arises from the coverage of Cu particles by ZnO_x species, as this substantially lowers the surface free energy of the system; see Table 1.

3.2. Electron microscopy

High resolution electron microscopy images of catalysts reduced at 600-900 K were taken to visualise morphology, size and distribution of the supported Cu and ZnO phases. Although the EDX pattern of the Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst did contain a small Zn peak, no distinct ZnO particles could be distinguished on the micrographs. This finding confirms the amorphous character of the ZnO phase found with XRD. The electron-dense Cu particles were seen in acceptable contrast with the silica support (see Fig. 4). Few Cu particles were clearly resolved and exhibited the proper d-spacing. Spherical Cu particles with a diameter of

3.9 ± 0.2 nm ($n=144$) distributed evenly on the support were observed for both types of catalyst reduced in the range 600-900 K. By comparing the HR-TEM and XRD results it is concluded that the Cu particle and crystallite size are the same in the mentioned range of reduction temperatures, i.e. the Cu phase is monocrystalline.

3.3. Thermogravimetry

DTG profiles were calculated to monitor the reduction process; as can be seen from Fig. 5 they exhibit very reproducible paths. The vertical lines at the end represent the weight loss during the hold-period when the final reduction temperature is reached. The unpromoted Cu/SiO₂ catalyst shows a sharp peak at 425 K, associated with the autocatalytic reduction of CuO clusters to Cu⁰ [23]. The shoulder and tail at higher temperatures are usually assigned to the (stepwise) reduction of very small Cu particles that interact more strongly with the support [24, 25].

The main reduction peak of the promoted Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst is broader and found at a higher temperature of 450 K; this phenomenon is ascribed to interaction with ZnO, and has been reported to increase with the ZnO loading [11]. The pronounced tail is attributed to the progressive partial reduction of ZnO. Since the ZnO/SiO₂ reference does not consume any H₂ up to ca. 750 K, it is plausible that this tail can be assigned to a specific Cu/ZnO interaction. The huge and broad peak at $T_{\text{red}} > 800$ K is due to sublimation of the volatile Zn⁰ from defective ZnO_x (see section 3.5).

The total weight loss of the samples after reduction is plotted in Fig. 6, and also expressed as equivalent H₂ consumption per Cu atom, assuming reduction of CuO. The reduction of the unpromoted Cu/SiO₂ catalyst is completed at 700 K when the H₂/Cu ratio equals 1; the further weight loss at $T_{\text{red}} > 800$ K may be attributed to either reduction or sintering of the silica support [26, 27]. The H₂ consumption of the promoted Cu/ZnO/SiO₂

catalyst exceeds 1 H₂/Cu atom at T_{red} = 600 K, and increases up to ca. 1.4 mol H₂/Cu atom at T_{red} = 800 K. The latter value corresponds to the H₂ consumption required to reduced all CuO and ZnO in the calcined catalyst. The dramatic weight loss at higher reduction temperatures is related to the abovementioned sublimation of Zn⁰ (see section 3.5).

3.4. N₂O chemisorption

N₂O chemisorption measurements were performed on Cu/SiO₂ and Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ samples reduced at elevated temperatures. Highly reproducible results were obtained for both catalyst systems after successive reduction – passivation cycles. This reproducibility is thought to indicate that the passivation treatment was mild enough not to result in significant structural changes. A ZnO/SiO₂ reference sample did not consume any oxygen from N₂O after reduction treatments at 500-1000 K. Consequently, no oxidisable Zn⁰ layer was formed in this sample.

For high-loaded Al₂O₃ supported systems it was reported that N₂O passivation induced modification of the Cu particle structure, ascribed to the heat of dissociative adsorption [28]; a H₂ TPD method was suggested by these authors to selectively measure the Cu metal area. Here, values were found to be highly reproducible, which justifies the use of the direct method.

N₂O chemisorption curves exhibit two different slopes: a fast weight increase during the first 10 minutes due to surface oxidation, and a slow weight increase resulting from subsurface oxidation that takes place simultaneously (Fig. 7) [20]. By increasing the N₂O concentration from 1% to 2%, the surface oxidation rate increased 1.6 times, as measured for Cu/SiO₂, while the subsurface oxidation rate did not change. The zero-order dependency of the latter was also reported by Luys et al. [20]. The corrected N₂O consumption, and thus the

metal surface area, was not affected by doubling the nitrous oxide pressure. Therefore, it is concluded that mass transfer through the porous basket in the thermobalance was not limiting.

It should be noted that the subsurface oxidation rate increases with temperature [20]. Due to the heat of reaction, the local temperature during N₂O chemisorption will strongly depend on the size and roughness of the Cu particles, as well as on the thermal properties of the system. This implies that formation of 1 Cu₂O monolayer only, as found on large single crystal faces [29], is likely to be exceeded on the Cu nanoparticles of our supported catalyst.

Initially, a substantial increase in oxygen uptake with reduction temperature is obtained for both Cu/SiO₂ and Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ systems (Figs. 7, 8). The behaviour of the unpromoted system can be explained by the increasing reduction degree of the copper particles at higher temperatures (see Fig. 6). The Cu surface area for this system has a maximum value of 16 m²/g_{cat} at 900 K (Fig. 8).

After reduction at higher temperatures the Cu surface area dramatically decreased to 5 m²/g_{cat} at 1073 K, although the XRD results indicate that sintering of Cu crystallites does not occur below 1100 K. The difference can be explained when it is assumed that after reduction above 900 K part of the Cu clusters is encapsulated by silica, driven by reduction of the surface free energy (see Table 1). It is known that silica sinters at high temperatures, which is accompanied and impelled by condensation of surface Si-OH groups [27, 30]; the associated weight decrease was also indicated by the TG data at T_{red} > 800 K.

After reduction at 450 K the same metal surface area was obtained for the ZnO-promoted and unpromoted catalyst, indicating equally sized Cu clusters. However, the metal surface area of the promoted system increases much stronger to reach a maximum value of 23 m²/g_{cat} after reduction at 800 K (Fig. 8). Based on the smallest particle size of 4 nm obtained from XRD, a maximal Cu surface area of 19 m²/g_{cat} can be calculated for the fully reduced Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst. The extra N₂O consumption plus the weight loss during

reduction in excess of the Cu-stoichiometry provide strong arguments that partially reduced ZnO_x species are formed in the presence of Cu, and that the interaction between Cu and ZnO increases with reduction temperature. Considering the observed shielding of Cu crystallites in the promoted system from oxidation by air, it is tentatively concluded that a partially reduced ZnO_x layer is formed on top of the metallic Cu phase.

It should be noted that a metallic Zn surface requires twice as much oxygen as a Cu surface upon oxidation by N_2O . Furthermore, the ca. 15% faster surface oxidation rate of the promoted catalyst after reduction at 800 K (see Fig. 7) can be explained by the higher affinity of Zn for oxidation compared to Cu [31].

A further increase of the reduction temperature to 900 K led to a decreasing metal surface area of the Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst (Fig. 8). ICP-AES analysis revealed that this can be attributed to sublimation of the metallic Zn from the partially reduced ZnO_x species (see section 3.5). Interestingly, removal of the ZnO_x layer from the Cu clusters leads to the exposure of almost the same metal surface area as in case of the unpromoted catalyst reduced at 900 K. It should be stressed that XRD measurements had already proven that the size of Cu crystallites in the promoted catalyst remained unchanged up to 900 K, excluding sintering as the cause of the decreased metal surface area.

3.5. ICP-AES analysis

The origin of the large weight losses of the promoted catalyst during reduction at high temperatures was identified using ICP-AES analysis. The metal content of the Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst and ZnO/SiO₂ reference after reduction at 300-1000 K are presented in Table 2, and expressed as residue compared to the freshly prepared material. While no ZnO is lost during calcination at 750 K (results not shown), it is obvious that the separate ZnO phase from the reference starts to disappear when heated above 800 K in a reducing atmosphere. This is

thought to occur by the creation of oxygen vacancies, and subsequent sublimation of highly volatile Zn^0 . At 1000 K all Zn has vanished from the reference system. In contrast, Zn from the promoted catalyst is more stable with a 12% residue persisting up to 1000 K. Interestingly, the Zn residue of the Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst after reduction at 900 K is also some 12% higher than the reference. This quantitative concurrence is thought to indicate brass formation, which is also required for thermodynamic reasons to reduce ZnO with H₂ [15]. It can be calculated that Cu particles with an average size of 4.0 nm found with XRD, require 60% of the total Zn amount to be covered completely with 1 monolayer of metallic Zn. So it may be speculated that 12%/60%=0.2 monolayer of metallic Zn is present as a stable Cu_{0.8}Zn_{0.2} surface alloy covering the Cu particles. Alloy formation has been suggested by various authors, e.g. [3, 30, 32]. Unlike a ZnO_x layer covering metallic Cu, it seems that such a surface alloy does not bring about additional N₂O consumption during passivation (see Fig. 8).

Since the disappearance of the covering ZnO_x layer around 900 K will lead to an increased surface tension of the Cu clusters, the sudden decrease of the Cu(111) plane at 1000 K (see Fig. 2) may be explained by formation of more spherical Cu particles.

4. COMPARISON WITH LEIS RESULTS

LEIS studies on ⁶³Cu/⁶⁸ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts by Jansen et al. [7] have established that the composition of the outermost layer depends strongly on the applied reduction temperature. In the range 473-673 K the CuO_x surface atomic density decreased from 4.4 % to 0.1 %, while that of ZnO_x remained ca. 4 %. These dispersion data can be explained by some sintering of highly dispersed Cu particles until a 'final' size of 4 nm, followed by their complete coverage with ZnO_x at higher reduction temperatures. The quantitative use of ZnO to cover the Cu clusters provides maximal metal-promoter interaction, and might explain the

optimal Zn content of ca. 5 wt % found for this catalyst for ester hydrogenolysis and methanol synthesis [11].

Depth profiles showed a rapid decrease of the Zn concentration with the ion dose, indicating that the enriched layer has a thickness of 1-2 monolayers only. From the 4.8 wt % Zn loading and the reported BET surface area of this catalyst of 350 m²/g [11], it can be calculated that 2.6 ZnO monolayers would be needed to obtain the experimental surface atomic density, i.e. cluster surface area, of 4%.

The oxidation state of the Cu and Zn atoms at the catalyst surface was established by comparing the LEIS signals before and after N₂O passivation. After reduction at 473 K the atomic composition of the outermost cluster surface was 42 % Zn²⁺, 2 % Zn⁰, 54 % Cu¹⁺, and 2 % Cu⁰ [7]. This means that 96 % of the outermost Cu surface was oxidic in nature, although we know from TG data that ca. 60 % of the CuO bulk has been reduced at 473 K (see Fig. 6). This outer Cu¹⁺ layer serves the purpose of reducing the surface free energy (see Table 1), but its presence in the reduced state implies that N₂O chemisorption affects the oxidation of subsurface layers. It should be noted that the distinction between surface and subsurface oxidation is purely based on kinetics (see Fig. 7).

After reduction at 673 K the atomic composition of the outermost cluster surface was 77 % Zn²⁺, 19 % Zn⁰, 3 % Cu¹⁺, and 1 % Cu⁰ [7], which clearly illustrates coverage of the Cu particles by Zn as well as reduction of ZnO in close contact with Cu. About two ZnO_x layers of this composition - with a Zn⁰ fraction of 20% of the total Zn - would be needed to account for the oxygen uptake during passivation, which corresponds to 22 % of the total Zn amount.

It is concluded that the general behaviour of the Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst deduced from the present XRD, N₂O chemisorption and ICP-AES data, is in good agreement with the results obtained previously with LEIS. A quantitative correspondence of the N₂O

chemisorption data requires fast oxidation of Cu^0 and Zn^0 in 1 or 2 additional layers of at $T_{\text{red}}=473$ K and 673 K, respectively.

5. CONCLUSIONS

XRD, TG, N_2O chemisorption, and ICP-AES characterisation of Cu/SiO_2 and $\text{Cu}/\text{ZnO}/\text{SiO}_2$ catalysts reduced at 450-1300 K enabled to study the behaviour of the different phases. The present results are consistent with those obtained with LEIS, and allow a better understanding of the structure of the highly active $\text{Cu}/\text{ZnO}/\text{SiO}_2$ catalyst reduced at 750 K.

Cu/ZnO interaction is responsible for the formation of special sites consisting of 4 nm Cu crystallites covered by 1-2 monolayers of partially reduced ZnO_x species. Formation of those sites starts after reduction at 450 K and increases up to 800 K. Reduction in the range 800-900 K leads to sublimation of the covering ZnO_x layer, thereby exposing the original Cu crystallites that probably have undergone surface alloying at some stage of the treatment. At reduction temperatures > 900 K, the Cu particles are likely to be encapsulated by the supporting SiO_2 . At still higher reduction temperatures the Cu crystallites start to sinter. Nevertheless, these SiO_2 supported systems can be considered as highly thermostable.

The dynamic structure of this methanol synthesis catalyst can be explained well by minimisation of the surface free energy of the Cu clusters. Reduction of the smallest CuO crystallites is completed only at 700 K, while the 4 nm Cu particles are fully covered with partially reduced ZnO_x species that protect metallic Cu largely from oxidation by air. At the same time, the Cu/ZnO interface is maximised, and it seems that no separate ZnO phase is present in catalysts of this composition. After sublimation of ZnO_x at very high reduction temperatures, the surface free energy of the system is lowered by encapsulation, and finally by sintering of the Cu particles.

Within the range 450-800 K, the amorphous ZnO phase was partially reduced only in the presence of Cu, which might be explained by surface alloying. This is supported further by the fact that metallic Zn in defective ZnO_x on top of Cu is oxidised reversibly by N₂O chemisorption. As a consequence, this method overestimates the Cu surface area of Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalysts. Otherwise, N₂O passivation of Cu nanoparticles does not saturate at the formation of a single Cu₂O layer.

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Figures & Tables

Fig. 1.

- X-ray diffraction patterns of the unpromoted Cu/SiO_2 catalyst after background subtraction. (1) Calcined; reduced at: (2) 500 K, (3) 600-900 K, (4) 1000 K, (5) 1200 K, and (6) 1300 K.
- X-ray diffraction patterns of the promoted $\text{Cu}/\text{ZnO}/\text{SiO}_2$ catalyst. (1) Calcined; reduced at: (2) 500 K, (3) 600-900 K, (4) 1000 K, and (5) 1300 K.

Fig. 2. Size of Cu (111) and Cu (200) crystal planes from the XRD spectra of Cu/SiO_2 (solid symbols) and $\text{Cu}/\text{ZnO}/\text{SiO}_2$ (open symbols) catalysts at increasing reduction temperature. Assignment: triangles for Cu (111), circles for Cu (200).

Fig. 3. X-ray diffraction pattern after reduction at 800 K, N₂O passivation, and subsequent exposure to dry air at 363 K: (1) Cu/ZnO/SiO₂; (2) Cu/SiO₂.

Fig. 4. HR-TEM image of Cu/SiO₂ after reduction at 900 K.

Fig. 5. DTG profiles during reduction: (a) Cu/SiO₂; (b) Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ and ZnO/SiO₂ reference. Sublimation of Zn⁰ is denoted by the dashed line.

Fig. 6. Weight loss after reduction and corresponding H₂ consumption per Cu atom of the ZnO-promoted catalyst (triangles) and unpromoted catalyst (circles) as a function of the reduction temperature. The weight loss after reduction of the ZnO/SiO₂ reference is also included (squares); sublimation of Zn⁰ is denoted by dashed lines.

Fig. 7. Oxygen uptake during N₂O chemisorption for supported Cu catalysts.

Fig. 8. Equivalent metal surface area of the ZnO-promoted catalyst (triangles) and unpromoted catalyst (circles) as a function of the reduction temperature. The ZnO/SiO₂ reference is also included (squares).

Table 1. Surface free energy (γ) of metals [32] and oxides [33].

	γ , mJ/m ²		γ , mJ/m ²
Zn	990	Cu	1825
ZnO	90	Cu ₂ O	825
SiO ₂	605	CuO	530

Table 2. Cu and Zn residue of the Cu/ZnO/SiO₂ catalyst and the ZnO/SiO₂ reference system after reduction at different temperatures T_{red} , as obtained from ICP-AES analysis.

T_{red} , K	Cu/ZnO/SiO ₂		ZnO/SiO ₂
	Cu _{red} /Cu _{fresh}	Zn _{red} /Zn _{fresh}	Zn _{red} /Zn _{fresh}
300	1.00	1.00	1.00
700	1.01	1.01	1.01
800	1.02	1.02	0.95
900	1.00	0.66	0.55
1000	1.02	0.12	0.00