Dehydrogenation of C4 hydrocarbons using
vanadium based catalysts

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Scientific Background and Aims

Dehydrogenation of n-butane to butene and butadiene is a highly interesting commercial process due to increasing demand for unsaturated hydrocarbons for industrial applications. Many commercial processes for the dehydrogenation of light alkanes use catalysts containing chromia or platinum supported on alumina. The dehydrogenation of alkanes is an endothermic process, which requires high reaction temperatures and low pressures. Unfortunately at higher temperatures light alkanes are produced and coke formation is encouraged causing catalyst deactivation. Oxygen treatment can be used to regenerate the catalyst, hence prolonging the life-time of the catalyst.

This study forms part of the ATHENA project one of the goals of which is to investigate selective gas-phase alkane dehydrogenation. As part of an international collaboration our aim is to utilise the techniques of high pressure in-situ XPS and NEXAFS to investigate the electronic structure of the vanadium species under reaction conditions. The techniques are used to gain a better understanding of alumina-supported VₓOᵧ based catalysts through investigation of their structure-reactivity relationships. In addition, ex-situ experiments (typically at 100 mbar pressure) were used to examine the differences in the reaction products and final state catalyst at increased pressure. By performing the experiments in an adjoining reaction chamber, the sample could be transferred under reaction gas atmosphere.

Results and Discussion

The electronic structure of vanadia/alumina catalysts was examined during the dehydrogenation of n-butane. High-pressure measurements were made possible due to a specially designed, differentially pumped, electrostatic lens system. Hence spectra could be measured while the cell pressure was maintained at 2 mbar. The reaction products were detected using a Proton Transfer Reaction Mass Spectrometer (PTRMS). An 8% V/alumina catalyst was examined both in- and ex-situ for the n-butane dehydrogenation reaction at partial pressures of 0.4 and 100 mbar of butane respectively.

![Figure 1. XPS of V2p3/2 region during n-butane dehydrogenation (2 mbar).](image)

After an initial treatment in oxygen, the 8% V/alumina catalyst contained predominantly VₓOᵧ crystals. This is in agreement with literature, as at vanadium loadings above one monolayer of V on alumina crystalline VₓOᵧ is expected to be the major species.1,2,3 However,
immediately after introduction of butane gas NEXAFS (not shown) reveals that the V$_2$O$_5$ structure is lost. This effect is confirmed by the XP spectra, which show a reduction of the vanadium species coupled with a decrease in intensity during the reaction (figure 1). The initial reduction may be due to removal of oxygen from the catalyst in the form of oxygenated products. Furan and dihydrofuran/crotonaldehyde were observed as the catalyst was heated to reaction temperature. After 87 mins there is a further shift in binding energy and a reduction in intensity. The shift to lower binding energy suggests a decrease in the vanadium oxidation state. This correlates with the formation of a surface carbon species, which is the main source of deactivation for dehydrogenation catalysts.

Figure 2 shows the trends of the reaction products: butadiene, furan, DHF/crotonaldehyde and benzene (butene not shown). There is a steep increase in the surface carbon content, which correlates with a maximum in benzene formation and is proportional to the decrease in butadiene formation. The carbon was identified as chain/graphitic carbon.

Therefore investigation of the surface species under reaction conditions has identified two stages. During reaction the vanadium species is reduced to contain a mixture of V$^{5+}$ and V$^{4+}$. At this point the catalyst is active and shows only slow deactivation. The second step is the deposition of carbon on the surface, which leads to further deactivation. This deactivation is mainly due to carbon laydown, which blocks the active vanadium sites.

As with the in-situ experiment, the ex-situ reaction showed formation of oxygenated products during heating in n-butane. Due to the higher partial pressure of n-butane, the catalyst rapidly deactivated over a period of only 30 minutes. A steep decline in activity was detected where benzene production reached a maximum. Hence it is likely that this point coincided with the formation of surface carbon, similarly to the in-situ reaction. Once transferred to the measurement cell, NEXAFS (figure 3) showed a great reduction in the vanadium species and XPS indicated high surface carbon content. The total percentage of elemental carbon detected on the catalyst surface was 46%. The ratio of vanadium to aluminium decreased on comparison of pre-
and post-reaction catalysts, suggesting that carbon laydown occurs preferentially on the vanadium.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the staff of BESSY for their support during the measurements. The funding for this work was provided by the ATHENA Project, which is jointly funded by the EPSRC (UK) and Johnson Matthey Catalysts plc.

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