Nonlinear Electrical Properties of Grain Boundaries in Oxygen Ion Conductors: Acceptor-Doped Ceria

Xin Guo, Shaobo Mi, and Rainer Waser
Institut für Festkörperforschung, Forschungszentrum Jülich, 52425 Jülich, Germany

Owing to the positively charged grain boundary cores in acceptor-doped ZrO$_2$ and CeO$_2$, oxygen vacancies are depleted in the space charge layers. The validity of this space charge concept was checked for Y$_2$O$_3$-doped CeO$_2$ ceramic of high purity. Electrical fields up to $2 \times 10^{5}$ V cm$^{-1}$ were applied to the grain boundaries of 1.0 mol % Y$_2$O$_3$-doped CeO$_2$ at 400°C in air, and the grain boundary properties were separated by means of impedance spectroscopy. It was discovered that the current-voltage relation for individual grain boundary was nonlinear, and that the effective grain boundary thickness increased with increasing bias, which supports the space charge concept.

Over a wide temperature and oxygen partial pressure range acceptor-doped ZrO$_2$ and CeO$_2$ are pure oxygen ion conductors, with oxygen vacancies being the charge carriers. The specific grain boundary conductivity of acceptor-doped ZrO$_2$ and CeO$_2$ is several orders of magnitude lower than the bulk conductivity. This low grain boundary conductivity has usually been attributed to an intergranular siliceous phase. However, the ionic conduction across the grain boundaries actually occurs solely through the direct grain-to-grain contacts: the presence of the siliceous phase only determines the fraction of the grain-to-grain contacts and constricts the ionic current across the grain boundaries. However, in ZrO$_2$ and CeO$_2$ materials of high purity in which a siliceous phase was not observed, the specific grain boundary conductivity was measured to be still orders of magnitude lower than that of the bulk. It is thus obvious that the grain-to-grain contacts, whose electrical properties are determined by the charge carrier distribution there, are themselves electrically resistive.

In the core-space charge layer model, a grain boundary consists of a grain boundary core (crystallographic mismatch zone) and two adjacent space charge layers. In 2 mol % Y$_2$O$_3$-doped ZrO$_2$, the enrichment of additionally added divalent and trivalent minority solutes at the grain boundaries was found to be significant, whereas the enrichment of pentavalent minority solutes was not observed, demonstrating a positive potential in the ZrO$_2$ grain boundary core. Gadolinium has almost perfect match of ionic radius in the CeO$_2$ lattice, therefore, the elastic strain resulting from the ion size mismatch is too small to be an effective segregation driving force; any Gd (i.e., Gd$_{O_{\infty}}$) segregation at the CeO$_2$ grain boundaries is mostly driven by the Coulomb interaction with a positive charge. The grain boundary segregation of Gd in Gd$_{O_{\infty}}$-doped CeO$_2$ was observed, being in accordance with the expected positive core potential. Molecular dynamics simulations of a 55 symmetrical tilt grain boundary in Y$_2$O$_3$-doped ZrO$_2$ shows that the structure relaxation can produce intrinsic oxygen vacancies in the grain boundary core. Electron energy-loss spectroscopy (EELS) investigations of the grain boundaries in Y$_2$O$_3$-doped ZrO$_2$ show a decrease in the O/Zr and O/Y ratios, indicating an enhanced oxygen vacancy concentration in the grain boundary core. Studies of the grain boundaries in Gd$_{O_{\infty}}$-doped CeO$_2$ ceramic samples reveal similar changes in the O/Ce ratio, indicating that these effects may be generic to the grain boundaries in fluorite-structured materials. The high concentration of oxygen vacancies in the grain boundary cores of acceptor-doped ZrO$_2$ and CeO$_2$ may account for the positive core charge.

The positively charged grain boundary cores of acceptor-doped ZrO$_2$ and CeO$_2$ expel oxygen vacancies; the charge carriers are therefore depleted in the space charge layers. The space charge depletion successfully explains the electrical properties of the grain-to-grain contacts. In particular, when subjecting ZrO$_2$ to external mechanical loads, the bulk and grain boundary electrical responses were found to be almost identical, indicating that the space charge layers are responsible for the grain boundary electrical responses. Because a space charge layer is a part of the bulk from a crystallographic point of view, but electrically it is a part of the grain boundary. At equilibrium and zero bias state the two space charge layers of a grain boundary are symmetrical; but after applying a dc bias voltage, one space charge layer is depressed, while the other one is extended. Such a situation should cause nonlinear grain boundary electrical properties under dc bias voltage. To conclusively prove the concept of space charge depletion, the nonlinear grain boundary electrical properties under dc bias voltage should be demonstrated.

Experimental

1.0 mol % Y$_2$O$_3$-doped CeO$_2$ ceramic samples, with 98% of the theoretical density and an average grain size of 35 μm, were prepared from CeO$_2$ powder and Y$_2$O$_3$ powder, both with 99.999% purity (Aldrich Chemical Co. Inc., Milwaukee, WI), by pressing and sintering at 1650°C in air for 15 h. The phase of the samples was confirmed by X-ray diffraction to be cubic. The microstructure was investigated by means of scanning electron microscopy (SEM, Hitachi model S-4100), and high-resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM, Philips model CM202 ST, operating at 200 kV). The SEM investigations were carried out on polished and thermally etched surfaces, and average grain sizes ($d_g$) were determined. The HRTEM samples were prepared by standard methods, involving mechanical grinding to a thickness of about 0.1 mm, dimpling to $-10$ μm, then ion-beam milling to electron transparency. The electrical properties were investigated by impedance spectroscopy, performed at 400°C in air at amplitude of 100 mV (1260 frequency-response analyzer, in conjunction with 1296 dielectric interface, Solartron Instruments, Farnborough, U.K.). The measured impedance spectra were fitted according to an equivalent circuit consisting of three $RQ$ circuits in series. Here R represents a resistance, $Q$ a constant phase element. Platinum paste was used to fabricate the porous electrodes.


© 2004 The Electrochemical Society. [DOI: 10.1149/1.1830393] All rights reserved.
Results and Discussion

High-purity powders were used to prepare the samples, the grain boundaries of the sintered samples are therefore essentially free of any second phase, as demonstrated by the HRTEM shown in Fig. 1: direct grain-to-grain contacts are prevailing at the grain boundaries. The complexity of the siliceous phase is thus avoided, under such a condition the effect of the space charge layers is dominant at the grain boundaries.5,6

Three arcs, corresponding to the impedance responses of the bulk, the grain boundaries, and the electrode, respectively, in order of decreasing frequency, were recorded in the complex impedance spectrum. Up to 14 V dc bias voltages were applied during the impedance measurements. The bulk properties were independent of bias (Fig. 2), indicating that the sample was not electrochemically degraded. On the contrary, the grain boundary properties were significantly changed under high enough bias voltages. Assuming cubic grains of the same size and homogeneous grain boundaries (brick-layer model), the bias over one (average) grain boundary is $U_{bias}R_{gb}/[(R_b + R_{gb} + R_{ele})N_{gb}]$. Here $U_{bias}$ is the applied dc bias voltage, and $R_b$, $R_{gb}$, and $R_{ele}$ are the resistances of the bulk, the grain boundaries and the electrode, respectively. The number of the grain boundaries, $N_{gb}$, in the thickness direction can be calculated from $L/d_g - 1$, with $L$ being the sample thickness and $d_g$ the average grain size. The current-bias over one grain boundary relation and the current-applied total bias relation are presented in Fig. 3; both are obviously nonlinear. The nonlinearity coefficient $\alpha = (d \log I/d \log U_{bias})$ is 2.0 for the current-bias over one grain boundary curve.

Assuming that the dielectric constants of the bulk and the space charge layers are equal, the effective grain boundary thickness, $d_{gb}$, can be calculated from $d_{gb}C_b/C_{gb}$, with $C_b$ and $C_{gb}$ being the capacitances of the bulk and the grain boundaries, respectively. The effective grain boundary thickness vs. the bias over one grain boundary relation is plotted in Fig. 4. The effective grain boundary thickness is roughly the combined thickness of two space charge layers. As shown in Fig. 4, the effective thickness increased with increasing bias over one grain boundary. Analogous to electronic conductors,17 the results given in Fig. 3 and 4 demonstrate that the Schottky barriers are formed at the grain boundaries.

A theoretical model for the dc voltage dependence of the grain boundary electrical properties has been developed for electronic conductors,17 however, the direct application of such a model to ionic conductors has not yet been justified. One obvious difference
between ionic and electronic conductors is that excessive change of ionic defects, e.g., oxygen vacancies, either in the lattice or at the grain boundaries always results in structure change. Therefore, the density of trap states at the grain boundaries of an ionic conductor is limited. Because of the very small effective grain boundary thickness, a small voltage is already enough to produce high electrical field over one grain boundary; the electrical field ranged mostly from $10^4$ to $2 \times 10^5$ V cm$^{-1}$ under the experimental conditions, which is high enough to cause the nonlinearity. Similar to electronic conductors, an applied dc bias depresses one of the two space charge layers at a grain boundary, whereas extends the other one. Figure 4 indicates that the overall effect was to increase the combined thickness of the two space charge layers.

**Conclusion**

The nonlinear dc bias dependence of the grain boundary electrical properties proves the space charge concept. Although the investigation was done on $Y_2O_3$-doped CeO$_2$ ceramic, the conclusion is of relevance to all acceptor-doped ZrO$_2$ and CeO$_2$.

**Institut für Festkörperforschung** assisted in meeting the publication costs of this article.

**References**