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C–ON bond homolysis of alkoxyamines triggered by paramagnetic copper(II) salts†

Gérard Audran,‡ Elena Bagryanskaya, Irina Bagryanskaya, Paul Brémond, Mariya Edeleva, Sylvain R. A. Marque,* Dmitriy Parkhomenko, Evgeny Tretyakov and Svetlana Zhivetyeva

The metal complexation reactions of bis(hexafluoroacetylacetonato)copper(II) (Cu(hfac)₂) with alkoxyamines (diethyl(2,2-dimethyl-1-(tert-butyl)-(1-(pyridine-4-yl)ethoxy)amino)propyl)phosphonate and diethyl(2,2-dimethyl-1-(tert-butyl)-(1-(pyridine-2-yl)ethoxy)amino)propyl)phosphonate) were studied. According to X-ray analysis, the molecular and crystal structures of 1:1 complexes depend on the configuration of the free alkoxyamines, that is dimeric (RRSR) and chain-polymeric (RR/SS) structures for para-pyridyl-substituted alkoxyamines, and cyclic unimeric (RS/RR) structure for ortho-pyridyl derivative. The complex (2:1 ratio Cu(hfac)₂/alkoxyamine) for ortho-pyridyl-substituted alkoxyamine is not resolved. Upon warming, ortho complexes decomposed into free alkoxyamines and only a weak activation was observed. Upon warming, para complexes decomposed into their corresponding unimers, and then, a 21-fold increase in the rate constant of the C–ON bond homolysis was observed compared to the corresponding free alkoxyamines. Tuning of the homolysis rate constant of the C–ON bond via addition of pyridine is also reported.

Introduction

In the last three decades, alkoxyamines have been used as an initiator/controller for Nitroxide Mediated Polymerization (NMP). In recent years, new practical applications arose in materials sciences, e.g., a new system of coding and self-healing polymers and led to deeper research into the kinetics of alkoxyamine formation and decomposition. Moreover, recently, the use of alkoxyamines as theranostic markers was described, that is based on the decomposition of alkoxyamines as a source of nitroxide and alkyl radicals. The nitroxides can be used for diagnostic purposes as spin probes for electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) tomography or as a DNP agent for magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), whereas alkyl radicals can serve as therapeutic agents due to their oxidant properties. The homolysis of the C–ON bond of alkoxyamines is triggered by external events such as a change in pH leading to the protonation of a group of an alkoxyamine or to complexation of an alkoxyamine by a Lewis acid. Protonation on the alkyl fragment and deprotonation on the nitroxyl fragment substantially promote homolysis of the C–ON bond of alkoxyamines. Complexation at the para position of the pyridine-based alkoxyamine 1 by a Lewis acid such as BH₃ increases the rate constant k₄ of the C–ON bond homolysis by a factor of 10. As far as we know, the activation of the C–ON homolysis by the complexation of an alkoxyamine with a metal centre has never been reported. It is reasonable to assume the possible activation of an alkoxyamine by its complexation with a metal centre of a protein in a biological system. This possibility prompted us to investigate for the first time the complexation of a pyridine-based alkoxyamine by metal salts and its influence on the kinetics of alkoxyamine homolysis.

It should be noted that recently Hicks and colleagues reported that the homolysis of the C–N bond in alkyl verdazyl 3 is increased by the complexation with a ruthenium salt as in 4, according to a decrease in E₉ ca. 20 kJ mol⁻¹. The difference between the reactions studied by Hicks and colleagues (C–N bond homolysis) and by us (the homolysis of the C–ON bond, Scheme 1) means that different bond energies and influences

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†Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Preparation, characterization, and Table S1 with XRD data of complexes 7 and 8. Fig. S1 (¹H NMR) and S2 (¹³C NMR) of complexes 7 and 8. CCDC 1483562–1483565. For ESI and crystallographic data in CIF or other electronic format see DOI: 10.1039/c6qi00277c

Scheme 1 C–ON bond homolysis in alkoxyamine.
of different effects are involved. Hence, the above result reinforced our confidence in this approach.

Thus, four complexes **R SSR-7, RR/SS-7, (RR/SS)-8** and **RS/SR-8** were prepared from alkoxyamines 1 and 2. Their structures were studied by X-ray diffraction (XRD) analysis, and \(^1\)H and \(^{31}\)P NMR, and their \(k_d\) was measured. Tuning of the rate constant \(k_d\) of the C–ON bond homolysis was investigated using pyridine as a competitor to form the N–Cu bond (Scheme 1).

### Experimental section

#### Synthesis

Infrared (IR) spectra were recorded on a Bruker Vector 22 spectrometer (KBr). Elemental analyses were performed on a Carlo Erba 1106 CHN elemental analyzer. Solvents and reagents were of reagent quality. Alkoxyamines 1 and 2 were prepared as previously reported\(^\text{11,12}\) as was the monohydrate of bis(hexafluoroacetylacetonato)copper(II) (\(\text{Cu(hfac)}_2\cdot\text{H}_2\text{O}\)) which was sublimated before use.\(^\text{15}\)

#### General procedure for complexes 7 and 8

A solution of \(\text{Cu(hfac)}_2\cdot\text{H}_2\text{O}\) (0.025 g, 0.05 mmol) in hot hexane (2.5 mL) was added dropwise to a solution of alkoxyamine (0.020 g, 0.05 mmol) in hexane (1 mL). The reaction mixture was stirred at room temperature for 1 h and kept in a freezer at \(-5\) °C for 24 h. Characterization of each complex is provided in the ESI.\(^\dagger\)

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pyridine (eq.)</th>
<th>(T (\pm 1^\circ\text{C}))</th>
<th>(k_d \quad (10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}))</th>
<th>(E_a \quad (\text{kJ mol}^{-1}))</th>
<th>(k_{d,120} \quad \text{c,}^d (10^{-3} \text{ s}^{-1}))</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1^e)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2^e)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5^e)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6^e)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>— (-e)</td>
<td>— (-k)</td>
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<td><strong>URSSR-7</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>113.0</td>
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<td>3.2</td>
<td>114.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>80</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>115.8</td>
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<td><strong>URSSR-7p_9</strong></td>
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<td>1.2</td>
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<td>121.2</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>URS/SS-7</strong></td>
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<td>80</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>114.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>80</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>115.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>120.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>100</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>122.0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>(RR/SS)-8p_2</strong></td>
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<td>2.2</td>
<td>121.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>(RR/SS)-8p_6</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>121.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(RR/SS)-8p_{12}</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>122.5</td>
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</table>

\(a\) Complexes 7 and 8 are identified by the species prone to cleave and by the equivalent of pyridine (\(p_a\)) implied in the reaction. \(b\) Given by eqn (1), error is less than 5%. \(c\) Given by eqn (2) using data from the 4\(^{th}\) column and the frequency factor \(A = 2.4 \times 10^{14} \text{ s}^{-1}\) as recommended in ref. 16. An error of 1–2 \(\text{kJ mol}^{-1}\) is assumed. \(d\) Estimated using eqn (2), activation energies \(E_a\), given in the 5\(^{th}\) column and the frequency factor \(A = 2.4 \times 10^{14} \text{ s}^{-1}\) (see ref. 16). \(e\) See ref. 11. \(f\) Averaged values of \(E_a\) of the two diastereoisomers. \(g\) See ref. 31. \(h\) Not available.
solvent served as a chemical shift reference. For $^{31}$P NMR, the signal of H$_3$PO$_4$ was used as an external reference. 1 K to 6 K scans were collected to achieve a good signal to noise ratio in the $^{31}$P NMR spectra. For temperature measurement the samples were heated in the cavity of the 500 MHz NMR spectrometer.

**XRD analysis**

Monocystal X-ray crystallographic analysis of the crystals was carried out on a Bruker Kappa Apex II CCD diffractometer using $\phi$, $\omega$-scans of narrow (0.5°) frames with Mo K$_\alpha$ radiation ($\lambda = 0.71073$ Å) and a graphite monochromator. The structures were solved by direct methods and refined by a full matrix anisotropic–isotropic (for atom H) procedure using the SHELXL97 software suite. Absorption corrections were applied using the empirical multiscan method in the SADABS software. The hydrogen atom positions were calculated by means of the riding model. In all complexes, some of the CF$_3$ groups are disordered by two positions: occupation ratios have been refined in these cases. The resulting crystal structures were analysed for short contacts between the unbonded atoms using PLATON and MERCURY software applications.

There were high difference peaks in the structure of RRSS-8. We assumed that this volume is occupied by highly disordered solvent molecules of hexane that could not be...
modelled as a set of discrete atomic sites. The free solvent accessible volume derived from the PLATON routine analysis was found to be 20% (571.0 Å^3). We employed the PLATON/SQUEEZE procedure to calculate the contribution to the diffraction from the solvent region and thereby produced a set of solvent-free diffraction intensity values.

Crystallographic data on the structures of RSSR-7, RR/SS-7, RS/SR-8 and RRSS-8 are collected in Table S1.†

Results and discussion
Preparation of metal complexes of alkoxyamines 7 and 8

Coordinately unsaturated copper(n) hexafluoracetateacetate (Cu(hfac)) is the most suitable for our purpose due to its solubility in weakly polar media, and because it is a strong Lewis acid and yields well-crystallizing coordination compounds. Nevertheless, when working with Cu(hfac), researchers should keep in mind that during its interaction with ligands, there are rather frequent situations (depending on synthesis conditions) when several products can be formed that differ in composition and/or structure.‡ Because sometimes different compounds crystallize as a mixture of products, it is necessary to find synthetic conditions where only one product is formed. This situation becomes even more complicated in the case of polydentate and stereochemically non-rigid ligands, such as diastereoisomers RS/SS-1 and RS/SR-2 and RR/SS-2. In such cases, it is always advisable to start the selection of conditions with the ones that seem intuitively correct in accordance with the structure and solubility of ligands. In particular, alkoxyamines 1 and 2 contain two strongest donor centres: the N atom of the pyridine ring and the O atom of the P=O moiety, and compounds 1 and 2 are fairly well soluble in hexane. Accordingly, to obtain the complexes, the choice of the ratio Cu(hfac)/alkoxyamine 1 : 1 appears rather reasonable, as does the choice of hexane as the solvent. Then, the reaction of Cu(hfac) with RS/SR-1 in the molar ratio 1 : 1 in hexane afforded the binuclear cyclic complex RSSR-7 with a quantitative yield.

Under the same conditions, mixing of Cu(hfac) with RR/SS-1 yielded the chain polymeric complex RR/SS-7 with the head-to-tail motif because of the coordination of the alkoxyamine via the N atom of the pyridine ring and the O atom of the P=O moiety (vide infra). Mixing of Cu(hfac), with RS/SR-2 also yielded the complex of 1 : 1 composition, but this time, the complex RS/SR-8 was formed due to the bidentate-cyclic coordination of the alkoxyamine.‡

In all the aforementioned cases, at the equivalent ratio of reagents, coordination compounds of stereochemistry Cu(hfac)/alkoxyamine = 1 : 1 were formed with a high yield. In the case of RR/SS-2, however, only the trinuclear complex RRSS-8 was isolated, but not in a high yield. An attempt to change the initial ratio of the reagents to 3 : 2 led to the formation of the complex (RRSS)-8 of composition 2 : 1, and the use of the reagent ratio 2 : 1 afforded (RRSS)-8 with 87% yield. The obtained complex outwardly resembled very thin intertwined fibres of light green colour, and all attempts to solve its structure failed.

As S(1)-pyridinyl-based alkoxyamines have several sites suitable for complexation, namely, the nitrogen atom on the aromatic ring, the nitrogen and oxygen atoms of the nitroso moiety and the oxygen atoms in the diethoxophosphoryl group, the formation of complexes is not so obvious. Therefore, XRD, ^1H and ^31P NMR analyses were performed to identify the sites involved in the formation of the complexes as well as the structure of these complexes in solution; this structure can be different from the one in the crystalline state.

Structural analysis of copper complexes 7 and 8
XRD§ showed the Cu/alkoxyamine ratio of 1 : 1 for the centro-symmetric dimeric complex RSSR-7, the polymer-chain complex RR/SS-7 and the molecular complex RS/SR-8, as well as the ratio 3 : 2 for the centro-symmetric trinuclear complex RRSS-8 (Fig. 3).

Interestingly, the complexes of RSSR-7 and RRSS-8 are composed of the enantiomers of the corresponding alkoxyamines. For the RR/SS diastereoisomer of 2 the less soluble complex of the unknown structure (RR/SS)-8 has the ratio 1 : 1 (Fig. 1). In all crystals, whatever the alkoxyamine (i.e., ortho or para) or the type of complex, the pyridine moiety is always located as a ligand in the equatorial position and the diethoxophosphoryl moiety always occupies an axial position as the ligand.|| Typically, the coordination bond lengths vary from 2.26 to 2.37 Å for l_Cu-O_∼P_ from 2.01 to 2.02 Å for l_Cu-N, from 2.16 to 2.39 Å for l_Cu-O (axial coordination), and from 1.93 to 1.99 Å for l_Cu-O (equatorial coordination). The bond lengths, distances and angles in alkoxyamines vary from 1.43 to 1.46 Å for l_Cu-O_ from 1.44 to 1.46 Å for l_Cu-O, from 1.83 Å to 1.86 Å for l_Cu-P, from 2.40 to 2.42 Å for d_Cu-C and from 111.7° to 112.8° for the <NO-C bond angle; no significant differences are observed with the data reported for 1.

Nonetheless, XRD revealed that the coordination bond Cu–O=P is the longest amongst all bonds between copper (n) and the atoms of the first sphere of coordination. Thus, the Cu–O=P bond is likely to be the weakest and, consequently, the most prone to be cleaved first in solution.

NMR analyses of copper(n) complexes 7 and 8

Because the X-ray structures are obtained in the solid state, their stability is not ensured in solution and may differ dramatically. Thus to get some clues about the species

---

† 64% yield was reached for the first purification. Then, after evaporation of the solvent, the dry residue was crystallized from a mixture of hexane/heptane (1 : 1) to obtain an additional amount (0.012 g) of the product.

‡ As RRSS-8 is a minor compound, no further investigations are performed except X-ray analysis.

† For RSSR-7, CCDC 1483562; for RR/SS-7, CCDC 1483563; for RRSS-8, CCDC 1483564; and for RSSR-8, CCDC 1483565.

|| The axial positions are determined as the position affording the longest Cu–O bond in 1,1,1,6,6,6-hexafluoropentan-2,4-dione.
observed in solution both at room temperature and upon warming, the stability of complexes 7, RS/\textit{SR}-8 and the complex powder 8 was assessed by $^1$H and $^{31}$P NMR using both temperature and the presence of pyridine to decompose complexes (Fig. 4 and ESI†).**

Indeed, for Cu(ii) complexes, pyridine has a valuable property in that it reacts quickly (and often in an irreversible way),23,24 with the Cu(ii) atom to displace weakly bonded ligands. Therefore, it is an efficient competitor to investigate the stability of our Cu(ii) complexes in solution. For pure RSSR\textit{-7} (Fig. 4a), a very broad peak in $^{31}$P NMR was observed. In the absence of pyridine no signal was recorded for aromatic protons and line broadening was observed for the nitroxyl fragment signal meaning that all protons are close to the paramagnetic centre, that is the pyridinyl and diethoxyphosphoryl moieties are bonded to Cu(ii) atoms as revealed by the X-ray structure (Fig. 3). Moreover, the detection of a broad $^{31}$P NMR signal likely denotes a fast equilibrium between the complex and its unimer form ($\textit{vide infra}$).††

Fig. 3 X-ray structures of RSSR\textit{-7} (a), RR\textit{SS} -7 (b), RS\textit{SR} -8 (c), and RR\textit{SS} -8 (d).

Chemical quenching experiments performed with pyridine showed an efficient quenching meaning that the RSSR\textit{-7} complex has been completely decomposed into its unimer USSR\textit{-7}P$_1$ carrying one pyridine in the coordination sphere of the Cu(ii) centre. The effects of both temperature and pyridine were investigated for RSSR\textit{-7} (Fig. 4b) and, because the same trends were observed (Fig. 4b) the comments on the experiments performed at room temperature hold. It is worth mentioning that the experiment, after warming in the absence of pyridine, showed that the equilibrium between complexes RSSR\textit{-7} and USSR\textit{-7} is shifted in favour of the latter because

**NMR experiments were performed with the same concentration in alkoxyamine for all samples.

††As the peak in $^{31}$P NMR is clearly narrower with one equivalent of pyridine than in its absence, it was assumed that the first equivalent of pyridine is mainly used to cleave the P=O--Cu bond to afford the unimer USSR\textit{-7} (Scheme 2 route b or c).
The $^{31}$P NMR peak is narrower (Fig. 4b) than at room temperature (Fig. 4a).

The $^1$H and $^{31}$P spectra in the presence and in the absence of pyridine as well as at room temperature and 60 °C suggested that the RSSR-7 complex is not stable in solution (Fig. 5), that its decomposition into a unimer as in case (iii) can be disregarded, that its decomposition into the free alkoxyamine as in case (i) requires a large excess of pyridine, and that the unimer $^{URSSR-7p}_1$ as in case (ii) is the species in solution for one equivalent of pyridine and in equilibrium with the RSSR-7 as described in Scheme 2.

The same procedure was applied to the RR/SS-7 complex and to complexes 8 (Fig. S1 and S2†) and afforded the same trends as for the RSSR-7 complex except for broader line widths for complexes 8 than for complexes 7 in $^{31}$P NMR (Fig. S2†). Consequently, the comments on complexes RSSR-7 and URSSR-7 hold for RR/SS-7 and URR/SS-7. For complexes 8, broader lines mean that an interaction with the radical centre occurred. Indeed, in the RS/SR-8 complex alkoxyamine plays the role of a chelating agent favouring the complexation of the metal centre and, hence, interactions stronger than in complexes 7. Taking into account the kinetics results (vide infra), the equilibrium for the complex RS/SR-8 is better described as

![Fig. 4 Room temperature (a) and 60 °C (b) data on $^{31}$P NMR at 0, 1, 6 and 12 equivalents of pyridine (from bottom to top) added to RSSR-7 (the asterisk denotes free (RR/SS)-1 as impurity).](image)

![Fig. 5 Schematic description of the structures possible for RSSR-7 in solution. On the left side is the solid state and on the right side species expected in solution. Dotted lines are for interaction between the Cu(ii) center and alkoxyamine. Full lines are for the cleaved bond. Alkoxyamine is schematically described as a yellow square for the nitroxyl fragment and as a blue square for the alkyl fragment. Cu(hfac)$_2$ is schematically described as a green circle. Possibilities of structures in solution are given as (i) to (iii).](image)

![Scheme 2 The kinetic scheme for the C–ON bond homolysis in the absence (route a) and in the presence of pyridine (routes b and c). Starting material (SM) is shown as the NRCu triangle. N, R, and Cu stand for the nitroxyl fragment, alkyl fragment, and copper metal center (Cu(hfac)$_2$). The NRCu triangle is for alkoxyamine complexed to Cu(ii) by the pyridyl ring. P is for pyridine and represents a pyridine ligand in NRCuP. Dotted letters are for the radicals issued from the corresponding fragment after the C–ON bond homolysis.](image)
an equilibrium between the complex and the free alkoxyamine (Scheme 2) is described by an equilibrium. For the sake of simplicity, only case (iii) where pyridine reacts with the unimer species (rate constants \( k_3 \) and \( k_5 \)) and case (iv) where the pyridine reacts with the starting materials (rate constants \( k_3 \) and \( k_8 \)) are considered in route c (Scheme 2).

For the \( \text{RSSR}^-\text{7} \) and \( \text{RSSR}^-\text{8} \) complexes, the growth in pyridine is described, respectively, as cyclic compounds showing two alkoxyamines and two Cu atoms in an alternating fashion (dimer), and a Cu atom bound simultaneously to the alky and nitroxy fragment of the alkoxyamine (cyclic unimer). It has been reported that cyclic alkoxyamines, either because of covalent bonding or due to intramolecular hydrogen bonding, have a stronger C–ON bond than their non-cyclic analogues do. Thus, assuming a fast exchange (vide supra), the homolysis of the C–ON bond in \( \text{RSSR}^-\text{7} \) and \( \text{RSSR}^-\text{8} \) is described in comparison with the homolysis of the unimeric species \( \text{USSR}^-\text{S} \) and \( \text{URS}^-\text{S} \) (or the corresponding free alkoxyamine). This comment holds for the kinetics in the presence of pyridine. Complex \( \text{RRS}^-\text{S} \) shows a polymeric structure composed of an alternating alkoxyamine and a copper centre in a 1:1 ratio. It has been reported that increasing the electron-withdrawing properties of substituents in the nitroxy fragment increases \( k_d \). Hence, the interaction between copper and the \( \text{P} = \text{O} \) moiety in \( \text{RRS}^-\text{S} \) is expected to enhance these electron-withdrawing properties, and therefore, to strengthen the C–ON bond. Consequently, the C–ON homolysis in the polymer species is disregarded. Because NMR data indicate the same type of equilibrium for complexes 7 and 8 as for \( \text{RSSR}^-\text{7} \), the aforementioned comments and Scheme 2 still hold.

The rate of generation of nitrooxide \( \text{SG1} \) (N) released by the homolysis of complexes is given by eqn (3) depending on the routes (Scheme 2) and assumptions. For route (a), the growth in \( \text{SG1} \) is given by eqn (3) and assuming a fast equilibrium with \( k_d \) larger than the C–ON bond homolysis rate constant \( k_1 \), \( k_d = k_1 k_3 (k_1 = k_1 / k_{-1}) \) (eqn (4)). For route (b), whatever the cases the chemical quenching conditions afford the growth of \( \text{SG1} \) as given by eqn (5), which corresponds to a first-order reaction with \( k_2 \) as the C–ON bond homolysis rate constant. For route c (Scheme 2), the growth in \( \text{SG1} \) is described by the kinetics of the second order as shown in eqn (6) in case (iii) and in eqn (7) and (8) (\( k_2 = k_2 / k_{-2} \), in case (iv)).

Nonetheless, it must be kept in mind that too large an excess of pyridine decomposes the unimer (vide supra) into a free alkoxyamine leading to a decrease in \( k_d \).

\[
\frac{d[N^*]}{dt} = \frac{k_1 k_3 k_5 - 1 + k_4 [\text{SM}]}{k_5} \quad (3)
\]

\[
\frac{d[N^*]}{dt} = k_1 k_4 [\text{SM}] \quad (4)
\]

\[
\frac{d[N^*]}{dt} = k_5 [\text{N} - \text{R} - \text{CuP}] \quad (5)
\]

\[
\frac{d[N^*]}{dt} = \frac{k_1 k_3 k_5 k_7}{k_{-1} + k_3 + k_5 k_7} [\text{P}][\text{SM}] \quad (6)
\]

\[
\frac{d[N^*]}{dt} = \frac{k_5 k_7}{k_{-2} + k_5} [\text{P}][\text{SM}] \quad (7)
\]

\[
\frac{d[N^*]}{dt} = K_2 k_3 [\text{P}][\text{SM}] \quad (8)
\]

For the \( \text{RSSR}^-\text{7} \) and \( \text{RRS}^-\text{S} \) complexes, the growth in \( \text{SG1} \) either in the absence or in the presence of one equivalent of pyridine is described by first-order kinetics. It means that for one equivalent of pyridine the conditions for a chemical quenching are fulfilled, that is there is a fast equilibrium between the complex and the free alkoxyamine leading to a decrease in \( k_d \).
unimer is significantly greater than $k_d$ for the unimer carrying pyridine.

Taking advantage of these results, the tuning of the homolysis of the C-ON bond was studied by varying the amount of pyridine from one (URSSR-7p) to 120 (URSSR-7p$_{120}$) equivalents for RSSR-7. As expected, only first-order growth in SGI was observed with the decreasing $k_d$ and with the increasing amount of pyridine (Table 1) meaning that complexes RSSR-7 and URSSR-7 are completely decomposed step-by-step into a free alkoxyamine because $E_a$ is 121.8 kJ mol$^{-1}$ for 120 equivalents of pyridine (URSSR-7p$_{120}$); very close to the value of the free alkoxyamine 1 (E$_a$ = 123.0 kJ mol$^{-1}$). Thus, these experiments on complexes 7 and pyridine (Table 1) point to the possibility of tuning the C-ON bond homolysis by changing the amount of pyridine.

Whatever the complexes 8 and the conditions are (0 to 12 equivalents of pyridine), $E_a$ values are between 120 and 123 kJ mol$^{-1}$ (Table 1) and, thus, very close to the values reported for free alkoxyamine 2 ($E_a$ = 124.0 kJ mol$^{-1}$) in sharp contrast to the results reported for complexes 7. Thus, the observations combined with the $^{31}$P NMR data (vide supra) support strongly the generation of free alkoxyamine in fast equilibrium with complexes 8. Thus, the kinetic data observed are modelled by using eqn (3) and (4) (route a) in Scheme 2) in the absence and in the presence of pyridine as the complexation of the copper(n) occurred after the decomposition of complexes 8 provided N-R–Cu is replaced by N-R. It has to be mentioned that $E_a$ of 6 is not available because the borane adducts decomposed upon heating to release free alkoxyamines 2, the event likely caused by the steric strain at the ortho position of the pyridinyl ring. Consequently, because the copper complex is larger than the BH$_3$ molecule, the steric strain is larger and upon warming (whatever the amount of pyridine), complexes 8 mainly decompose into free alkoxyamines 2, accounting for the values of $E_a$ observed. In contrast to BH$_3$ which is a gas, the copper complex stays in solution and can still interact with free alkoxyamines 2 affording $E_a$ values slightly lower than those reported for free 2.

### Conclusion

In this work, we demonstrate for the first time that an alkoxyamine’s homolysis can be effectively triggered by complexation with a metal. It is shown that for alkoxyamines with several groups suitable for complexation, different types of complexes can be formed such as cyclic, dimeric and linear chain polymers. The synthesis of five complexes of a pyridine-based alkoxyamine with Cu(hfac)$_2$ was performed and the structure was confirmed for four of five using XRD analysis. The use of pyridine as a competitor for complexation of the metal centre allows us to gain deeper insight into the decomposition kinetics of such complexes.

As far as we know, this article is the first report on tuning the C-ON bond homolysis using a nucleophilic reaction based on the exchange of a ligand in a metal center. The effects due to the size and charge of the metal, and the polarity and the bulkiness of the ligands need to be carefully investigated. Nonetheless, the 21-fold increase in $k_d$ observed for the complexation of the pyridyl moiety of 1 at the para-position by a Cu(n) complex as a Lewis acid highlights nicely the potential of Lewis acids based on a metal as activators of the C-ON bond in alkoxyamines. These results may find valuable application in Material Sciences as polymerization initiators from the metal surface or as theranostic agents.

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### Notes and references