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# Direct electroreduction of oxides in molten fluoride salts

M. Gibilaro\*, J. Pivato, L. Cassayre, L. Massot, P. Chamelot, P. Taxil

Laboratoire de Génie Chimique UPS/CNRS, Département Procédés Electrochimiques, Université de Toulouse, 118 route de Narbonne, 31062 Toulouse Cedex, France

## A B S T R A C T

A new kind of electrolyte composed of molten fluorides has been evaluated in order to perform a feasibility study of the direct electroreduction reaction. The direct reduction of  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  was realised in  $\text{LiF-NaF}$  at  $750^\circ\text{C}$  and in  $\text{LiF-CaF}_2$  at  $850^\circ\text{C}$  for  $\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{TiO}$ . The electrochemical behaviour of these oxides was studied by linear sweep voltammetry: a current corresponding to the oxide reduction was evidenced for  $\text{TiO}_2$ ,  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ . After galvanostatic electrolyses, a complete conversion was obtained for all oxides, except  $\text{TiO}$ , and the structure of reduced  $\text{Ti}$  and  $\text{Fe}$  samples had a typical coral-like structure while dense drops of  $\text{Sn}$  were recovered ( $\text{Sn}$  is liquid at operating temperature). After  $\text{TiO}$  electrolysis, a thin external metallic titanium layer was detected, acting as a barrier for the oxide ion diffusion and no complete reduction can be achieved. This could be explained by a Pilling-Bedworth ratio around 1 for  $\text{Ti/TiO}$ .

### Keywords:

Molten fluoride  
Direct reduction  
Metallic oxide  
Pilling-Bedworth ratio

## 1. Introduction

In the last decade, a new electrochemical process has been developed in order to convert solid oxides into their metal: the direct electrochemical reduction. Chen et al. [1] have first achieved the direct reduction of  $\text{TiO}_2$  into  $\text{Ti}$  in a molten chloride salt composed of  $\text{CaCl}_2$ . This innovative method is now often referred as the FFC (Fray-Farthing-Chen) Cambridge process, where the overall reaction is the oxygen removal from a solid  $\text{M}_x\text{O}_y$  oxide at the cathode (1) and the formation of  $\text{CO}_2(\text{g})$  at the carbon anode (2), according to:



The FFC process has been intensively studied worldwide, exclusively in molten chloride salts ( $\text{LiCl}$  or  $\text{CaCl}_2$ ), for different purposes: high purity  $\text{Si}$  production [2], spent nuclear fuel processing (reduction of rare earth oxides [3],  $\text{UO}_2$  [4],  $\text{U}_3\text{O}_8$  [5],  $\text{MOX}$  [6], spent fuel [7], etc.), pure metal or alloy production (reduction of  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$ ,  $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{NiO-TiO}_2$ , etc. [8–10]). No data are available in the literature for the electrochemical reduction of  $\text{SnO}_2$ ,  $\text{TiO}$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  whereas  $\text{TiO}_2$  has been intensively studied in chloride salts [1,11–13]. In molten  $\text{CaCl}_2$ , its reduction pathway has been proposed [14] and several titanium sub-oxides have been characterised ( $\text{Ti}_4\text{O}_7$ ,  $\text{Ti}_3\text{O}_5$ ,  $\text{Ti}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{CaTi}_2\text{O}_4$ ).

However, up to now, no process has reached the industrial scale. A recurrent problem is that the final product is often polluted by carbides, due to the reduction of carbonates  $\text{CO}_3^{2-}$  formed by the reaction of the  $\text{CO}_2(\text{g})$  anodic product with  $\text{O}^{2-}$  cations dissolved in the salt [15]. Furthermore, carbon particles coming from the anode often causes short-circuits in the cell. An option to avoid carbide formation is to use an oxygen evolving anode, on which the electrochemical reaction is:



However, this reaction is difficult to control in chloride salt due to the close potentials of  $\text{Cl}_2(\text{g})$  and  $\text{O}_2(\text{g})$  evolution [4] and corrosion occurs on anodic materials like  $\text{Pt}$  [16] or  $\text{SnC}$  [17].

In this work, a different category of electrolyte was tested, i.e. the molten fluorides, with the advantage of using an inert gold anode, allowing  $\text{O}_2(\text{g})$  evolution [18] as presented in Fig. 1(a). If the oxide concentration in these molten solvents is high enough, corrosion of such anodic material will not occur.

The direct reduction was applied to four different oxides:  $\text{SnC}$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  in  $\text{LiF-NaF}$  at  $T=750^\circ\text{C}$  and  $\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{TiO}$  in  $\text{LiF-CaF}_2$  at  $T=850^\circ\text{C}$ , with the main purpose of the first assessment of the feasibility of the reduction reaction.

The first part of the work is dedicated to the electrochemical characterisation of oxide samples by linear sweep voltammetry. Then, galvanostatic electrolyses have been performed on small amounts of oxide pellets ( $\sim 200\text{--}300\text{ mg}$ ) and the reaction products have been characterised by SEM-EDX and XRD.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 561 558 677; fax: +33 561 556 139.  
E-mail address: gibilaro@chimie.ups-tlse.fr (M. Gibilaro).

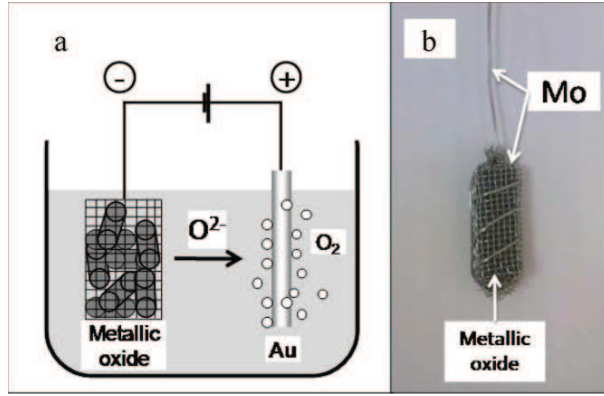


Fig. 1. (a) Schematic representation of the FFC Cambridge process and (b) picture of metallic oxide sample.

## 2. Experimental

The cell consisted of a vitreous carbon crucible placed in a cylindrical vessel made of refractory steel. The inner part of the walls was protected against fluoride vapours by a graphite liner. Experiments were performed under inert argon (U grade) atmosphere. More details can be found in a previous paper [19].

The electrolyte (200 g) was composed either of the eutectic LiF–CaF<sub>2</sub> (79–21 molar) or of the eutectic LiF–NaF (61–39 molar), from Carlo Erba Reagents (99.99%). The salt mixtures were dehydrated by heating under vacuum ( $\sim 10^{-4}$  bar) from room temperature up to the melting point (767 °C and 649 °C respectively) for 72 h. 2 g of lithium oxide (Li<sub>2</sub>O) powder (Cerac 99.5%) were added after salt melting to provide oxide ions into the bath. The Li<sub>2</sub>O concentration was maintained at a concentration higher than 1 mass.% during electrochemical runs, ensuring that the anodic reaction corresponded to oxygen formation, and thus, preventing the gold oxidation.

TiO<sub>2</sub>, TiO, SnO<sub>2</sub> and Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub> were used in the form of sintered pellets (Alfa Aesar 99.9%). The oxide pellets, attached with a molybdenum grid connected to the current lead thanks to a molybdenum wire (Fig. 1(b)), were used as working electrodes. The auxiliary electrode was a gold wire with a large surface area ( $S = 3.6 \text{ cm}^2$ ) and all potentials were referred to a platinum wire (0.5 mm diameter), acting as a quasi-reference electrode Pt/PtO<sub>x</sub>/O<sup>2-</sup> [20].

The electrochemical experiments were performed with an Autolab PGSTAT 30 potentiostat/galvanostat. After resin embedding and polishing, the cathode bulk was examined with a scanning electron microscope (LEO 435 VP) equipped with an EDS probe (Oxford INCA 200). XRD characterisations were performed with a Diffractometer D5000 Siemens.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Solvent selection

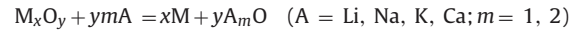
In order to perform the direct electrochemical reduction of a given metal oxide in fluoride mixtures, solvent selection is important: reduction of the metal oxide has to occur at a potential more positive than the alkaline/alkaline earth deposition one. A thermodynamical study has been carried out, using data from [21] and taking into consideration both the solvent components (metal, fluorides and oxides compounds) and the oxide to be reduced. The most common fluoride salts, composed of binary mixtures based on LiF, NaF, KF and CaF<sub>2</sub>, have been taken into account.

Table 1

Standard free energy data related to the relative stability of Li, K, Na, Ca (Eq. (5)) and Li<sub>2</sub>O, K<sub>2</sub>O, Na<sub>2</sub>O, CaO (Eq. (6)) in fluoride media (data from [21]).

| Reaction  | Standard free energy $\Delta_r G^\circ$ (J mol <sup>-1</sup> ) at 800 °C |
|---|--|
| KF(s) + Li(liq) = K(g) + LiF(s)                                 | -52,892  |
| NaF(s) + Li(liq) = Na(liq) + LiF(s)                             | -47,464  |
| 0.5CaF <sub>2</sub> (s) + Li(liq) = 0.5Ca(s) + LiF(s)           | 13,137   |
| K <sub>2</sub> O(liq) + 2LiF(s) = 2KF(s) + Li <sub>2</sub> O(s) | -139,381   |
| Na <sub>2</sub> O(s) + 2LiF(s) = 2NaF(s) + Li <sub>2</sub> O(s) | -90,582  |
| CaO(s) + 2LiF(s) = CaF <sub>2</sub> (s) + Li <sub>2</sub> O(s)  | 39,935   |

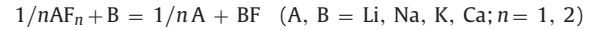
- (i) The Gibbs energy ( $\Delta_r G^\circ$ ) of the reaction between a metal oxide and an alkaline metal indicates whether the oxide is reduced by the alkaline:



(4)

If  $\Delta_r G^\circ$  is negative, the oxide reduction occurs at a potential more positive than the solvent alkaline deposition and the direct reduction is then achievable thermodynamically. If  $\Delta_r G^\circ$  is positive, an  $A_mO$  activity decrease (i.e. a decrease of its concentration in the molten salt) may allow the reduction reaction to occur [22].

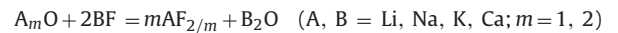
- (ii) Since binary fluoride mixtures are considered, the relative stability of alkaline/alkaline earth metal has to be established, in order to determine which A-compound is involved in Eq. (4):



(5)

Calculated standard free energy data at 800 °C related to Eq. (5) are compiled in Table 1, considering the LiF/Li redox system as a reference (B = Li in Eq. (5)): the Gibbs energy of reaction (5) is negative for KF and NaF compounds, meaning that they are reduced at a more positive potential than LiF. On the other hand, CaF<sub>2</sub> is reduced at a potential more negative than LiF. The relative stability of the metals, which is valid in the 500–1000 °C temperature range, is thus: Ca < Li < Na < K. As a consequence, in the case of the reduction in LiF–CaF<sub>2</sub> mixtures, the first metal to be formed will be Li, while Na is favored in LiF–NaF mixtures.

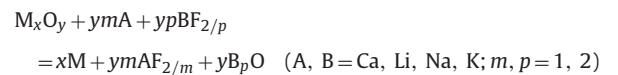
- (iii) A last equilibrium to consider in the case of the direct reduction of metal oxides in binary fluoride mixtures is the relative stability of the alkaline oxides produced according to Eq. (4). Indeed the oxide  $A_mO$  related to the most stable alkaline is likely to react with the fluoride compound BF<sub>2/m</sub> of the less stable alkaline according to:



(6)

The Gibbs energy of reaction (6), indicated in Table 1 with LiF/Li<sub>2</sub>O as a reference (B = Li in Eq. (6)), allows a relative stability of oxides to be established: CaO > Li<sub>2</sub>O > Na<sub>2</sub>O > K<sub>2</sub>O.

- (iv) Combining Eqs. (4) and (6), the overall general reaction to be considered in a binary system is:



(7)

As discussed for Eq. (4), if  $\Delta_r G^\circ$  of reaction (7) is negative, the metal oxide reduction should occur at a potential more pos-

**Table 2**

Standard free energy of various reduction reactions based on Eq. (7); maximum  $\text{Li}_2\text{O}/\text{CaO}$  activity for the reduction of metal oxides at  $750^\circ\text{C}/850^\circ\text{C}$  (data from [21]);  $a(\text{AF}_n)$  is the activity of the solvent components.

| LiF–NaF eutectic at $750^\circ\text{C}$  | Standard free energy of reaction $\Delta_r G^\circ$ ( $\text{J mol}^{-1}$ ) | Maximum $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$ activity |
|--|---|--|
| $a(\text{LiF}) = 0.6$ ; $a(\text{NaF}) = 0.4$  |   |  |
| $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4(\text{s}) + 8\text{Na}(\text{liq}) + 8\text{LiF}(\text{s}) = 3\text{Fe}(\text{s}) + 8\text{NaF}(\text{s}) + 4\text{Li}_2\text{O}(\text{s})$ | –720,164  | 1                                      |
| $\text{SnO}_2(\text{s}) + 4\text{Na}(\text{liq}) + 4\text{LiF}(\text{s}) = \text{Sn}(\text{liq}) + 4\text{NaF}(\text{s}) + 2\text{Li}_2\text{O}(\text{s})$         | –398,486  | 1                                      |
| $\text{TiO}_2(\text{s}) + 4\text{Na}(\text{liq}) + 4\text{LiF}(\text{s}) = \text{Ti}(\text{s}) + 4\text{NaF}(\text{s}) + 2\text{Li}_2\text{O}(\text{s})$           | 6662  | 0.68                                   |
| $\text{TiO}(\text{s}) + 2\text{Na}(\text{liq}) + 2\text{LiF}(\text{s}) = \text{Ti}(\text{s}) + 2\text{NaF}(\text{s}) + \text{Li}_2\text{O}(\text{s})$              | 68,084  | $3.3 \times 10^{-4}$                   |
| LiF– $\text{CaF}_2$ eutectic at $850^\circ\text{C}$  | Standard free energy of reaction $\Delta_r G^\circ$ ( $\text{J mol}^{-1}$ ) | Maximum $\text{CaO}$ activity          |
| $a(\text{LiF}) = 0.8$ ; $a(\text{CaF}_2) = 0.2$  |   |  |
| $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4(\text{s}) + 8\text{Li}(\text{liq}) + 4\text{CaF}_2(\text{s}) = 3\text{Fe}(\text{s}) + 8\text{LiF}(\text{s}) + 4\text{CaO}(\text{s})$        | –1,161,343  | 1                                      |
| $\text{SnO}_2(\text{s}) + 4\text{Li}(\text{liq}) + 2\text{CaF}_2(\text{s}) = \text{Sn}(\text{liq}) + 4\text{LiF}(\text{s}) + 2\text{CaO}(\text{s})$                | –615,693  | 1                                      |
| $\text{TiO}_2(\text{s}) + 4\text{Li}(\text{liq}) + 2\text{CaF}_2(\text{s}) = \text{Ti}(\text{s}) + 4\text{LiF}(\text{s}) + 2\text{CaO}(\text{s})$                  | –216,432  | 1                                      |
| $\text{TiO}(\text{s}) + 2\text{Li}(\text{liq}) + \text{CaF}_2(\text{s}) = \text{Ti}(\text{s}) + 2\text{LiF}(\text{s}) + \text{CaO}(\text{s})$                      | –43,810   | 1                                      |

itive than the formation of the most stable alkaline. Table 2 shows the calculated maximum  $A_m\text{O}$  activity (pure solid  $A_m\text{O}$  as reference state) below which reduction is favored according to Eq. (7). Only two common eutectic systems were considered in the first approach: LiF– $\text{CaF}_2$  (61–39 molar) at  $850^\circ\text{C}$ , for which  $A = \text{Li}$  and  $B = \text{Ca}$  in Eq. (7), and LiF–NaF (79–21 molar) at  $750^\circ\text{C}$ , with  $A = \text{Na}$  and  $B = \text{Li}$ . The activity of the fluoride compounds was considered equal to their molar fraction for the Gibbs energy calculations.

It comes from Table 2 that all considered oxides can be reduced in the LiF– $\text{CaF}_2$  eutectic at any  $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$  concentration while, in the LiF–NaF eutectic,  $\text{Na}_2\text{O}$  activity has to be lower than 0.0003 and 0.68 for TiO and  $\text{TiO}_2$  compounds respectively. LiF–NaF solvent was thus not considered to be adapted to the reduction of titanium metal oxides, since such salt mixtures would require a careful control of the oxide concentration.

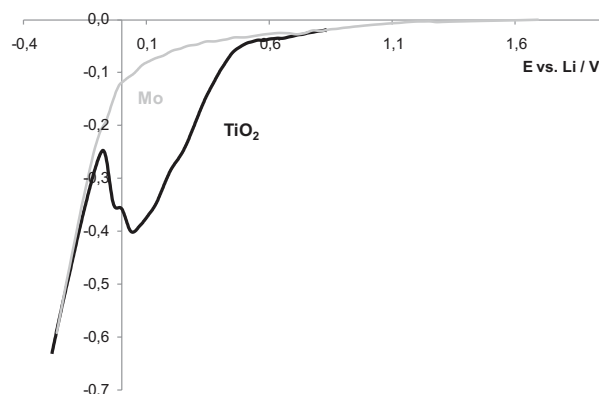
According to these thermochemical considerations, the direct electroreduction of  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  has been investigated in the eutectic LiF–NaF at  $750^\circ\text{C}$  while the eutectic LiF– $\text{CaF}_2$  at a working temperature of  $850^\circ\text{C}$  was selected for titanium oxides.

### 3.2. Electrochemical study

The electrochemical behaviour of the four oxides was studied by linear sweep voltammetry at low scan rate ( $5 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$ ). Potentials were referred to the solvent reduction, either  $\text{Li}^+/\text{Li}$  for LiF– $\text{CaF}_2$  or  $\text{Na}^+/\text{Na}$  for LiF–NaF, and are reported as follows: V vs. X (X = Li or Na).

A linear voltammogram for  $\text{TiO}_2$  in LiF– $\text{CaF}_2$ – $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$  at  $850^\circ\text{C}$  is presented in Fig. 2. From 0 to 0.45 V vs. Li, an additional cathodic current is measured and attributed to the direct reduction of titanium dioxide. The same electrochemical technique was applied for TiO characterisation, but no signal corresponding to the reduction of TiO was evidenced. This was attributed to the low electronic conductivity of TiO, which, unlike  $\text{TiO}_2$ , does not form conductive Magnelli phases  $\text{TiO}_{2-x}$  at the early stage of the direct reduction process [23].

The  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  electrochemical characterisation is represented in Fig. 3. Significant reduction currents are observed respectively at 1.3 and 0.6 V vs. Na and are attributed to the direct reduction reaction. Moreover, these oxides are easier to reduce than titanium oxides compounds, since their reduction potential is much more anodic than the solvent reduction potential.

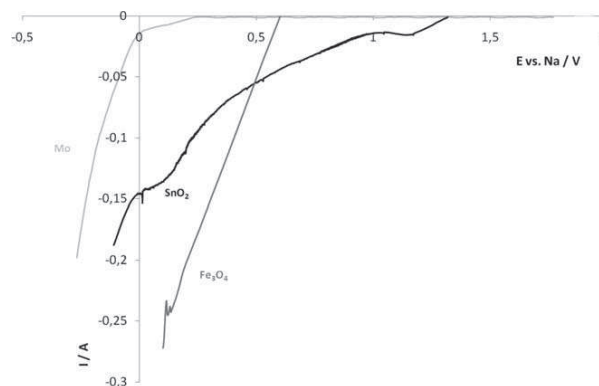


**Fig. 2.** Linear sweep voltammograms on Mo ( $S = 0.31 \text{ cm}^2$ ) and  $\text{TiO}_2$  at  $5 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$  in LiF– $\text{CaF}_2$ – $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%) at  $T = 850^\circ\text{C}$ .

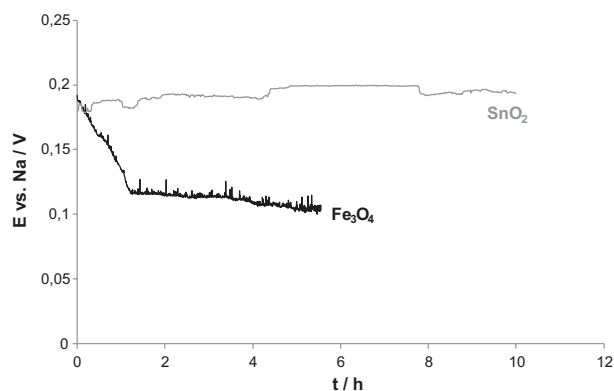
### 3.3. Product characterisation after direct reduction runs

Direct reduction experiments have been conducted in constant-current mode, for different intensities and durations.

Fig. 4 presents a superimposition of one of the electrolyses realised in LiF–NaF at  $750^\circ\text{C}$  on  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  and  $\text{SnO}_2$ . The measured potential is very stable and always higher than the reduction potential of the solvent cation, meaning that the major part of the current has been used for the metal oxide direct reduction.



**Fig. 3.** Linear sweep voltammograms on Mo ( $S = 0.31 \text{ cm}^2$ ),  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  at  $5 \text{ mV s}^{-1}$  in LiF–NaF– $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%) at  $T = 750^\circ\text{C}$ .



**Fig. 4.**  $\text{SnO}_2$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  electrode potentials during galvanostatic electrolysis versus time at  $750^\circ\text{C}$  in  $\text{LiF-NaF-Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%).

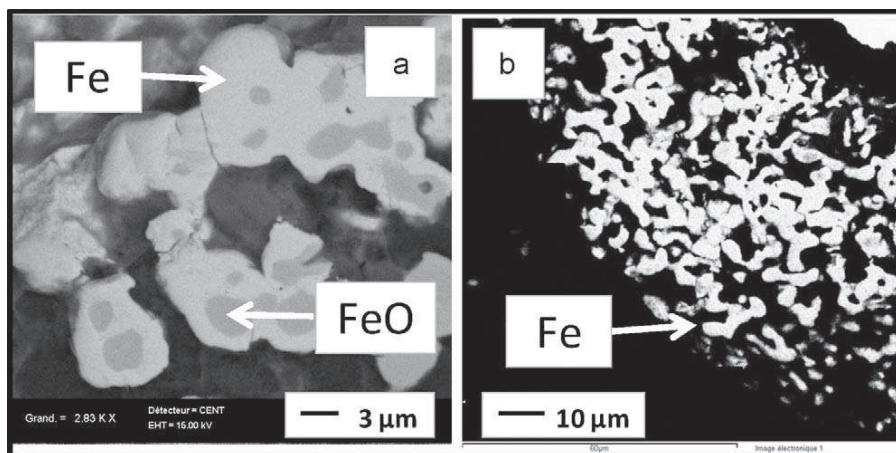
The cross section of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  pellets after direct electroreduction realised in different experimental conditions are presented in Fig. 5. In Fig. 5(a), for  $I = -0.04\text{ A}$ ,  $t = 20,000\text{ s}$  and  $m = 284\text{ mg}$ , the SEM-EDX analysis indicates the presence of FeO, metallic Fe and no more  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ . From the partially reduced sample, the following reduction pathway is proposed:



The inner layer of the metallic grain is composed of FeO whereas the external layer is formed of metallic Fe: the direct reduction of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  took place progressively from the outside of the pellet.

A complete conversion of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  pellet into metallic iron, presented in Fig. 5(b), has been obtained when a higher electrical charge imposed:  $I = -0.1\text{ A}$ ,  $t = 10,000\text{ s}$  and  $m = 275\text{ mg}$ . No oxide phase was detected and the sample was only composed of Fe and frozen salts. The resulting product was very porous and had a coral-like structure due to the oxygen removal. This typical pattern is commonly obtained after the direct reduction of oxides, as  $\text{UO}_2$  in molten chlorides [24].

The reduction pathway observed on  $\text{SnO}_2$  in  $\text{LiF-NaF}$  at  $750^\circ\text{C}$  is:



**Fig. 5.** Micrographs cross section of  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$  sample after electrolysis. Experimental conditions:  $\text{LiF-NaF-Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%),  $T = 750^\circ\text{C}$ ; (a)  $I = -0.04\text{ A}$ ,  $t = 20,000\text{ s}$ ; (b)  $I = -0.1\text{ A}$ ,  $t = 10,000\text{ s}$ .

The presence of SnO, illustrated in Fig. 6(a), was detected on the partially reduced sample ( $m = 210\text{ g}$ ) close to the electrode surface and some Sn, which is liquid at the operating temperature, was found adhering on the Mo basket. The major part of metallic Sn had sunk at the bottom of the crucible and coalesced to form small balls recovered after the experiment cooling, as pictured in Fig. 6(b). The current efficiency, determined from the mass of recovered Sn, was found to be around 75%.

For  $\text{TiO}_2$  ( $m = 298\text{ mg}$ ), a complete reduction was achieved in  $\text{LiF-CaF}_2$  at  $I = -0.1\text{ A}$  and  $t = 60,000\text{ s}$ . The cross section is presented in Fig. 7. Similarly to the Fe system, the characteristic sponge-like structure was observed with a homogeneous reduced material. In the partly converted sample, XRD analyses indicated the presence of salt components ( $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$ ,  $\text{CaO}$ ,  $\text{LiF}$ ,  $\text{CaF}_2$ ), metallic titanium and a  $\text{LiTiO}_2$  compound. Moreover, in these analyses, no carbide phases were detected which supports the use of a gold anode for fluoride molten salts experiments.

Due to the sponge-like structure, some frozen salt is inserted into the final metallic product. Several methods are available for metal/salt separation: the van Arkel process [25], the arc melting method [26] or the distillation under vacuum [27]. The pyro-vacuum distillation could be envisaged and has been recently applied by Kapoor et al. [28] for the purification of zirconium produced in chloride salts. This process could be applied to the fluoride salts, but the purification step has not been studied in this work.

The current efficiency is quite low, around 25%, for the fully reduced  $\text{TiO}_2$  sample. In Fig. 8, the electrolysis potential versus time is presented, where, at the beginning of the electrolysis, the electrode potential is lower than the solvent reduction. Some of the current was then used for the solvent deposition leading to a low current efficiency. To increase the current efficiency, the current should be stepwise decreased during the experiment to avoid the solvent ion reduction.

As no electrochemical signals were obtained for TiO, the electrolysis was performed in the same conditions as for  $\text{TiO}_2$ :  $I = -0.1\text{ A}$  and  $t = 60,000\text{ s}$ . The external part of the TiO sample observed by SEM (Fig. 9) was converted into pure Ti metal (thickness around  $10\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ ); but the bulk of the pellet still remained as TiO starting material. A possible explanation could be provided by Pilling-Bedworth rule [29] considerations: as proposed by Li et al. [30] in the case of oxide layer reduction, if the molar volume of the formed metal  $V_m$  is smaller than the molar volume of the oxide  $V_o$ , the formed metal on the oxide surface is porous enough to allow the molten salt electrolyte accessing to the underlying oxide. Thus the respect of this condition is required to successfully perform the



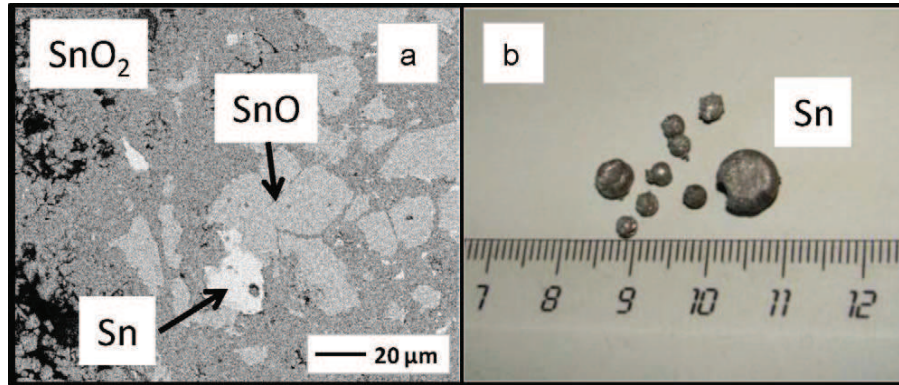


Fig. 6. (a) Micrograph cross section of  $\text{SnO}_2$  after electrolysis in  $\text{LiF-NaF-Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%) and (b) picture of Sn balls found in the bottom of the crucible.

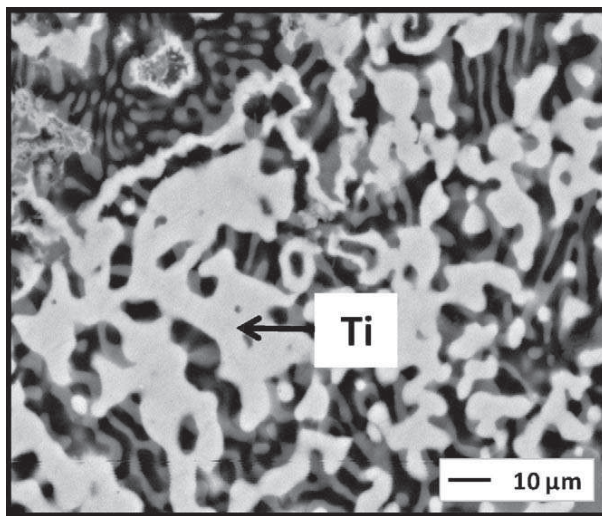


Fig. 7. Micrograph cross section of  $\text{TiO}_2$  after electrolysis in  $\text{LiF-CaF}_2\text{-Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%),  $T=850^\circ\text{C}$ ,  $I=-0.1\text{ A}$ ,  $t=60,000\text{ s}$ .

direct electrochemical reduction within the bulk of the oxide:

$$\frac{V_m}{V_o} < 1 \quad \text{with} \quad V_m = \frac{M_m}{\rho_m} \quad \text{and} \quad V_o = \frac{M_o}{\rho_o}$$

where  $M$  is the molar mass,  $\rho$  is the density and  $n$  the number of metal atoms in the oxide formula.

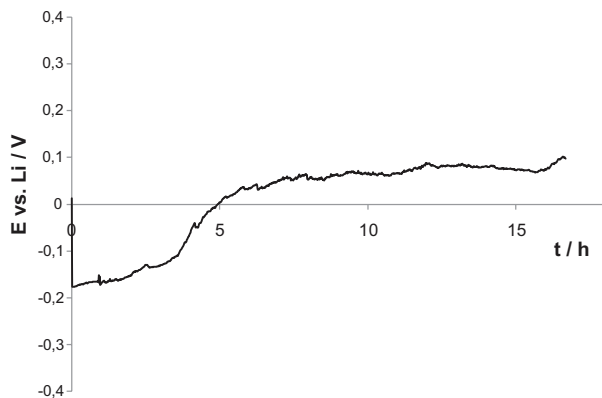


Fig. 8.  $\text{TiO}_2$  electrode potential during galvanostatic electrolysis versus time at  $850^\circ\text{C}$  in  $\text{LiF-CaF}_2\text{-Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%),  $T=850^\circ\text{C}$ ,  $I=-0.1\text{ A}$ ,  $t=60,000\text{ s}$ .

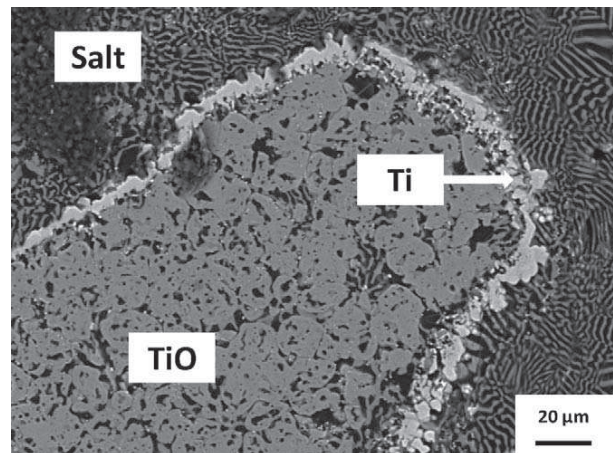


Fig. 9. Micrograph cross section of  $\text{TiO}$  after electrolysis in  $\text{LiF-CaF}_2\text{-Li}_2\text{O}$  (1 mass.%),  $T=850^\circ\text{C}$ ,  $I=-0.1\text{ A}$ ,  $t=60,000\text{ s}$ .

Table 3  
Metal to oxide molar volume ratios.

| $M/M_{\text{ox}}$ | $\text{Fe}/\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ | $\text{Ti}/\text{TiO}_2$ | $\text{Ti}/\text{TiO}$ |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| $V_m/V_o$         | 0.47                              | 0.56                     | 0.86                   |

In Table 3 are gathered the metal to oxide molar volume ratios for the different metal oxides studied in this paper. The  $\text{SnO}_2/\text{Sn}$  system was not considered since the formation of liquid Sn implies a constantly renewed oxide surface. Except for  $\text{TiO}$ , the calculated ratios are around 0.5, meaning that a noticeable volume constriction occurs during oxide conversion into metal. This observation is in agreement with our experiments concerning  $\text{TiO}_2$  and  $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ : a complete conversion is achievable, and a porous metal phase is produced. But for  $\text{TiO}$ , the metal to oxide molar volume ratio is close to 1: the molar volumes are then approximately equal. The reduction is thus kinetically difficult because the diffusion of the generated oxide ions towards the electrolyte is hindered by the formation of a dense metal layer: the metal surface covers the whole oxide layer and forms a barrier to the solid state electroreduction, as observed in Fig. 9.

#### 4. Conclusions

In replacement of the usual chloride molten salts ( $\text{CaCl}_2$  and  $\text{LiCl}$ ), fluoride salt mixtures have been used for the first time in this work in order to evaluate their potentialities as electrolytes for the

direct electrochemical reduction of oxide phases (TiO, TiO<sub>2</sub>, SnO<sub>2</sub> and Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>). An inert oxygen-evolving gold electrode was used as anode, instead of the commonly carbon one which produces CO<sub>2</sub> and leads to the formation of carbides in the reduced cathodic product. The gold anode was not attacked, as virtually no weight loss was observed; the same gold spiral has been reused in all experiments. Tests at larger scale may allow some anode corrosion to be evidenced, but this was not the purpose of the present paper, which was more focused on the feasibility study of the reduction reactions.

TiO was slightly reduced with an external Ti layer of 10 μm. This layer blocked the oxide ion diffusion to the anode and thus, stopped the reaction progress; as proposed by Li et al. [30], the ratio of molar volumes of metal and oxide appears to be a very important parameter which strongly affects the oxide to metal conversion. In all the electroreduced samples, XRD analysis did not reveal the presence of any carbide phase. For three of them (TiO<sub>2</sub>, SnO<sub>2</sub> and Fe<sub>3</sub>O<sub>4</sub>), a complete conversion to metal was achieved.

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