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# Impact of fabrication process of polyethylene / boron-nitride nanocomposite on morphology and dielectric properties

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**Abstract-** Nanocomposite (NC) films are extensively investigated due to their improved properties attributed to the interphase formed between the nanoparticle and the matrix. In this work, we focus our interest on Polyethylene (PE) / Boron Nitride (BN) NC. The objective of this paper is to investigate the influence of BN concentration and film thickness on NC morphology and interphase properties. Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM), Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) and its derived mode the Electrostatic Force Microscopy (EFM) are used to characterize the NC morphology and relative dielectric permittivity ( $\epsilon_r$ ). Results show that an increase of the BN concentration has no influence on the crystallinity degree even if a disappearance of spherulite structures is observed. An increase of the surface roughness is observed as well and is more pronounced for thicker NC films. Moreover, it is shown that the interphase  $\epsilon_r$  is lower than the matrix one and the BN concentration seems to have no influence on neither the interphase thickness nor its  $\epsilon_r$ .

## I. INTRODUCTION

Polymer-based nanocomposite (NC) appears as the best way to improve electrical insulation properties for various applications ranging from microelectronic devices to electrical machines and HVDC cables [1-3]. Indeed, results reported in the literature emphasize that the adjunction of a small amount (i.e. few weight percent) of nanoparticles (NP) could increase the breakdown strength and the dielectric permittivity or decrease the leakage current [1, 4-5]. This improvement is attributed to the presence of an interphase area, surrounding the NP, whose properties differ from the matrix and NP ones [6]. According to the literature, the interphase area seems to exhibit a more ordered polymer chains than the matrix [7-8], to have a lower dielectric permittivity [8-9] and deeper traps [10]. However, the interphase properties remain poorly characterized mainly at the nanoscale and the relevant influencing parameters (e.g. NPs shape, dimension, nature, surface treatment or concentration) need to be identified. In addition to the interphase properties, another drawback is related to the control of NP dispersion in the polymer matrix [11]. Indeed, NP aggregation leads to the deterioration of not only electrical properties (breakdown strength, conductivity...), but also mechanical and thermal ones. Finally, the effect of the NC film thickness is rarely investigated even if some papers report an influence on

morphology [12] and on deep-trap density [13]. In this context, the present paper deals with the impact of NP elaboration process and concentration on morphological and dielectric properties. To reach this goal, Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) and Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) are used to characterize the morphology. The interphase dielectric properties are addressed using Electrostatic Force Microscopy (EFM), which appears as a promising tool to characterize a nanoscale permittivity [7-9, 14]. For this study, we focus our interest on low density polyethylene (LDPE) / boron nitride (BN) NC. Indeed, LDPE is widely used as insulating material in various applications. LDPE NC presents interesting properties in terms of space charge limitation (LDPE/SiO<sub>2</sub> [10, 13], LDPE/TiO<sub>2</sub> [15], LDPE/ZnO [11]), dielectric strength improvement (LDPE/MgO [16], LDPE/TiO<sub>2</sub> [17] or tree inception voltage increase (LDPE/Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> [18]). However, interphase properties in LDPE-based NC have not yet been investigated.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### A. Materials processing

**Preparation of casting solution.** 1.0 gr of PE (Borealis) containing no additives was dissolved in 10 mL of hot toluene and stirred at 80 ° C. 100 mg of BN (Sigma-Aldrich, nanopowder,  $\leq$  150 nm avg. size) for a 10 wt.% BN-LDPE and 10 mg of BN for a 1 wt.% BN-LDPE were added to the hot PE in toluene and continued stirring at 80 °C for 3h.

**Film preparation.** A clean Teflon sheet was placed on a heated (90 °C) doctor blade platform for 1h prior to film casting. For each film 5 mL of the hot casting solution was transferred onto the Teflon sheet at 90 °C and the solution was spread using a blade whose dimension depends on target thickness. For a 6  $\mu$ m-thick film a 10 or 20  $\mu$ m blade with speed 1 is used whereas a 400  $\mu$ m-thick blade with speed 1 is used for 20  $\mu$ m-thick films. The heating was then switched off, allowing the temperature to drop gradually. The films were then placed in a water bath for 30 minutes, before peeling the PE/BN film off the Teflon support. For preparation of the reference films (pure LDPE), the same procedure was followed using the casting solution with no BN (1.0 gr PE in 10 mL toluene). Silicon wafer supported samples were

prepared via manual dip coating using hot casting solutions at 80 °C. The samples were then dried at ambient conditions.

### B. Nano- and macro-scale characterization

The PE/BN NC films morphology was characterized by SEM in cross-section (SEM FEI Hélios nanolab 600i using 2 kV for the acceleration voltage) and AFM in tapping mode (Bruker Multimode 8).

The crystallinity degree was determined by Differential Scanning Calorimetry (DSC) (TA Instruments DSC 2010). Measurements were performed under N<sub>2</sub> atmosphere at a flow rate of 40 ml/min and a temperature gradient from -150 °C to 150 °C with a heating rate of 10 °C/min.

The relative dielectric permittivity ( $\epsilon_r$ ) of the PE/BN NC films was deduced from EFM phase shift  $\Delta\Phi$  measurements (Bruker Multimode 8 apparatus). A PtIR-coated silicon tip (resonance frequency  $f_0 = 63.2$  kHz, spring constant  $k = 6.7$  N.m<sup>-1</sup>, quality factor  $Q = 355$  and curvature radius  $R_c = 26$  nm) and a 50 nm-lift were used. The phase shift  $a_{\Delta\Phi}$  parameter is deduced using the following equation [19]:

$$a_{\Delta\Phi} = [\Delta\Phi(V_1) - \Delta\Phi(V_2)]/[V_1^2 - V_2^2] \quad (1)$$

where  $\Delta\Phi(V_i)$  is the phase shift measured with a bias voltage  $V_i$  (respectively 0 V and 10 V) applied on the tip whereas the sample backside is grounded.

The methodology developed to extract the  $\epsilon_r$  cartography from the measured phase (or frequency) shift parameter is composed of three steps [8]. First, the electric field distribution in air and in the dielectric layer as well as the electrostatic force ( $F_e$ ) on the AFM-tip were computed using a 2D-axisymmetric finite element model (FEM) on COMSOL Multiphysics®. Secondly, the second derivative of the capacitance between the AFM probe and the sample ( $d^2C / dz^2$ ) was deduced from  $F_e$ . Finally the related phase shift  $a_{\Delta\Phi}$  parameter is computed using:

$$a_{\Delta\Phi} = [Q/(k)] [d^2C/dz^2] \quad (2)$$

It is to note that the phase shift parameter  $a_{\Delta\Phi}$  can be computed for various configurations, such as an homogeneous material and NC films with or without interphase.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. PE/BN nanocomposite films morphology

Fig. 1.a presents the surface topography of a 6  $\mu$ m-thick pure LDPE film. Spherulites can be observed, with a radius of around 2  $\mu$ m. The same morphology is observed for 20  $\mu$ m-thick pure LDPE films. An arithmetic surface roughness  $R_a$  of 30 nm and 36 nm is measured for the 6  $\mu$ m-thick and the 20  $\mu$ m-thick LDPE film respectively. A further analysis of the PE morphology using the Power Spectrum Density (PSD) approach is used [20]. The PSD was plotted as a function of frequency for different AFM surface topography scans (inset of Fig. 1.a). At high frequencies (80  $\mu$ m<sup>-1</sup> – 300  $\mu$ m<sup>-1</sup>), the fractal model can be applied and the PSD can be expressed by:

$$\text{PSD} = K/f^s \quad (3)$$

where  $K$  is the spectral strength,  $f$  the frequency and  $s$  the slope of the PSD logarithmic plots vs spatial frequency.

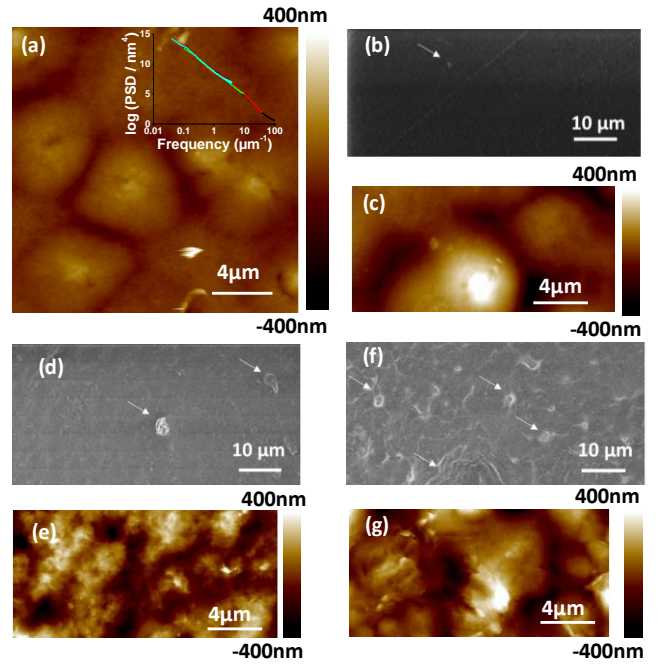


Fig. 1. (a) AFM surface topography of 6  $\mu$ m-thick pure LDPE. Inset the 2D Power Spectrum Density (PSD) for 50  $\mu$ m x 50  $\mu$ m (blue), 20  $\mu$ m x 20  $\mu$ m (green), 5  $\mu$ m x 5  $\mu$ m (red) and 2  $\mu$ m x 2  $\mu$ m (black) scans. (b) SEM and (c) AFM surface topography of 20  $\mu$ m-thick 1 wt.% PE/BN NC. (d, f) SEM and (e, g) AFM surface topography of (d, e) 6  $\mu$ m-thick and (f, g) 20  $\mu$ m-thick 10 wt.% PE/BN NC.

At low frequencies (1  $\mu$ m<sup>-1</sup> – 30  $\mu$ m<sup>-1</sup>), the k-model can be applied and the PSD can be expressed as:

$$\text{PSD} = A/(1+B^2f^2)^{C+1/2} \quad (4)$$

where  $A$ ,  $B$  and  $C$  are fitting parameters related to the surface morphology. The more important one is  $B$  as it corresponds to the correlation length.

For pure LDPE, the slope  $s$  is around 1 which implies a fractal dimension  $D$  of 2 and an inhomogeneous distribution (i.e. abrupt variation) of peaks over the surface. Moreover, a correlation length  $B$  of 12  $\mu$ m is obtained which is higher than the spherulite lateral dimension (between 4  $\mu$ m and 6  $\mu$ m). This is probably related to the fact that spherulites are not observed over the entire surface.

Fig. 1.b and Fig. 1.c compare the surface morphology of 1 wt.% PE/BN probed by SEM and AFM respectively. At large scale (Fig. 1.b) the NC surface seems flat and only one aggregate is observed. At small scale (Fig. 1.c) the NC surface is similar to the pure LDPE one and spherulites are observed. When the amount of BN NP increases to 10 wt.%, the surface morphology is modified. At large scale, the amount of aggregates increases and this is more pronounced for thicker NC films (Fig. 1.d and 1.f). Moreover, spherulites are no more visible at small scale and the surface morphology appears rough (Fig. 1.e and Fig. 1.g). PSD plots for nanocomposites are similar to pure LDPE ones.

Surface roughness  $R_a$ , fractal dimension  $D$  and correlation length  $B$  are summarized in Table 1. For 1 wt.% PE/BN NC the  $R_a$ , and the  $B$  are similar to pure PE. However, when the amount of BN NP increases up to 10 wt.%  $R_a$ , increases and  $B$  decreases.

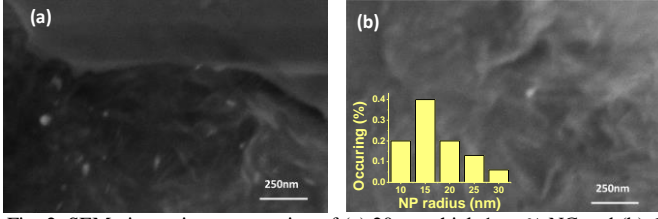


Fig. 2. SEM picture in cross-section of (a) 20  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick 1 wt.% NC and (b) 6  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick 10 wt.%

TABLE I  
Surface roughness  $R_a$ , fractal dimension  $D$ , correlation length  $B$  and crystallinity degree  $\chi_c$  for PE and NC films.

Material	Thickness	Ra (nm)	D	B ( $\mu\text{m}$ )	$\chi_c$ (%)
PE	6 $\mu\text{m}$	30	2	12	41.2
	20 $\mu\text{m}$	36	2	12	41.1
PE/BN 1 wt.%	20 $\mu\text{m}$	25	2	10	38.8
PE/BN 10 wt.%	6 $\mu\text{m}$	85	2	6	/
	20 $\mu\text{m}$	85	2	6	38.2

SEM observations for NC cross-sections demonstrate that BN NP are well dispersed in the volume for 1 wt.% (Fig.2.a) or for 10 wt.% (Fig.2.b) even if aggregates are observed on the surface (Fig. 1.b, 1.d and 1.f). According to SEM cross-section observations, the radius of BN NP can be determined. The resulting data are given in the inset of Fig. 2.b. The NP radius mean value is  $17 \text{ nm} \pm 6 \text{ nm}$ .

Finally, DSC measurements were performed to extract the materials crystallinity degree ( $\chi_c$ ).  $\chi_c$  is calculated from the melting peak using the following equation:

$$\chi_c = (\Delta H_m / \Delta H_{100}) \times 100 \quad (5)$$

where  $\Delta H_m$  is the measured melting heat and  $\Delta H_{100}$  the theoretical melting heat for 100% crystalline PE = 293 J/g [21].  $\chi_c$  was calculated for two heating cycles for each sample and the mean value is presented in the last column of Table I. The BN concentration and the NC film thickness have practically no influence on  $\chi_c$  (taking into consideration the  $\chi_c$  relative error > 2.3%). Thus, the spherulites disappearance within the 10 wt.% PE/BN has almost no effect on  $\chi_c$ . The increase of the film thickness favors the formation of BN NP aggregates without impacting  $\chi_c$ .

### B. PE/BN nanocomposite films dielectric properties

EFM measurements and related calculations performed on pure LDPE (not presented in the present paper) lead to a calculated permittivity of 2.2, whatever the thickness. This is in the range of what is usually measured for LDPE. Fig. 3 summarizes EFM measurements performed on PE/BN NC in term of topography and apparent dielectric permittivity. Concerning the 1 wt.% PE/BN, the topography map emphasizes that isolated NP (addressed by black arrow on Fig. 3.a) are observed and present a lower  $\epsilon_r$  than the matrix one (Fig. 3.d). Concerning the 6  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick 10 wt.% PE/BN, the topography map (Fig. 3.b) emphasizes that isolated NP (black arrows) as well as NP aggregates (red arrow) are observed. The NP  $\epsilon_r$  in this case is also lower than the matrix one (Fig. 3.e). The same observation is true for 20  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick 10 wt.% PE/BN.

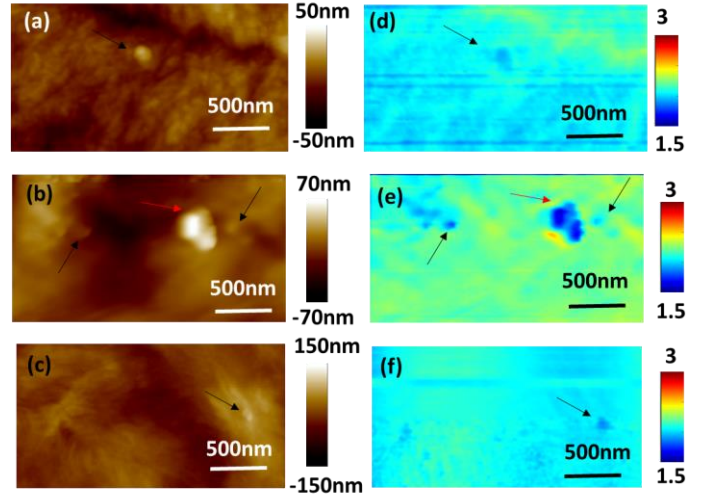


Fig. 3. (a-c) surface topography and (d-f)  $\epsilon_r$  maps of (a, d) 20  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick 1 wt.% PE/BN NC, (b, e) 6  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick 10 wt.% PE/BN NC and (c, f) 20  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick 10 wt.% PE/BN NC. Black (red) arrows indicate single NP (aggregate)

For all measured NC, the  $\epsilon_r$  far from the NP is calculated in the range from 2 to 2.2, which is close to the LDPE one. Moreover,  $\epsilon_r$  over the NP is lower than the matrix one. This phenomenon is inconsistent with the fact that BN presents a higher  $\epsilon_r$  than LDPE. This phenomenon has already been observed with EFM measurements on PE/TiO<sub>2</sub> [9] and polyimide/Si<sub>3</sub>N<sub>4</sub> [8]) or with dielectric spectroscopy on PE/Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> [22]. This permittivity decrease over the NP was attributed to a lower value of the interphase permittivity compared to the matrix one.

Determining the interphase relative permittivity ( $\epsilon_{ri}$ ) requires to come back to the experimental phase shift parameter  $a_{\Delta\phi}$  results. Fig. 4.a and 4.b compare the topography and  $a_{\Delta\phi}$  profiles over BN NP. Results are shown for a protuberant NP and more particularly for a 50-100 nm-height one. Whatever, the BN NP concentration,  $a_{\Delta\phi}$  is around  $-0.115 \pm 0.005 \text{ } ^\circ/\text{V}^2$  over PE and around  $-0.075 \pm 0.005 \text{ } ^\circ/\text{V}^2$  over NP.

Moreover a more complex FEM model taking into account the matrix (thickness = 20  $\mu\text{m}$  and  $\epsilon_r = 2.2$ ), the BN NP (NP radius fixed at 20 nm according to the Fig.2.b inset and  $\epsilon_r = 4$ ) and the interphase (unknown thickness and  $\epsilon_{ri}$ ) is needed. Fig. 4.c represents the evolution of the computed phase shift parameter  $a_{\Delta\phi}(2)$  as a function of the interphase  $\epsilon_{ri}$  and thickness. Results highlight that all curves intercept at  $a_{\Delta\phi} = -0.1 \text{ } ^\circ/\text{V}^2$  and  $\epsilon_r = 2.2$ , which corresponds to the PE matrix parameters. Moreover, the  $a_{\Delta\phi}$  variation as a function of  $\epsilon_{ri}$  shows a steeper slope for high interphase widths, which implies a higher sensitivity when the interphase width is more important. Moreover, when the interphase  $\epsilon_{ri}$  is lower than the matrix one, an increase of the interphase thickness induces an increase of  $a_{\Delta\phi}$  as well. On the contrary when  $\epsilon_{ri}$  is higher than the matrix one, an increase of the interphase thickness induces a decrease of  $a_{\Delta\phi}$ .

According to Fig. 4.c, a large number of  $\epsilon_{ri}$ /thickness couples are possible to describe the interphase for 1 wt.% and 10 wt.% PE/BN. Indeed, the interphase thickness needs to be higher



than 60 nm and its  $\epsilon_{ri}$  should be between 1 and 2. These high values for the interphase thickness are consistent with the topography profile width (around 200 nm on Fig 4) and the “shadow” observed around NP aggregates on Fig. 3. Finally, the BN NP concentration seems to have a weak influence on the interphase width and permittivity. This implies that the degradation of NC performances at high NP concentrations (i.e. higher than 2-3 wt.%) observed in a large number of NC [11] should be related to the NP aggregation rather than the interphase thickness.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper addresses the influence of BN NP concentration and NC film thickness on morphology and dielectric properties. Results highlight that the NC film thickness has a low impact on the crystallinity but favor the NP aggregation. Moreover, an increase of the BN concentration induces the disappearance of the spherulite structure and the surface roughness increase without really affecting the crystallinity degree. Concerning interphase properties, results show that the  $\epsilon_{ri}$  is lower than the matrix one and the BN concentration seems to have no influence on neither the interphase thickness nor its dielectric permittivity.

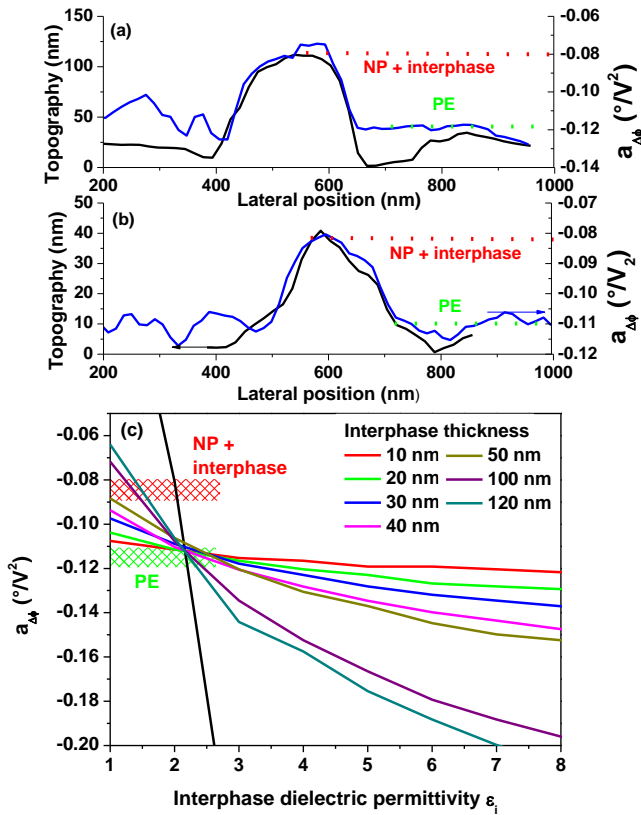


Fig. 4. Topography and phase shift parameter ( $a_{\Delta\phi}$ ) profiles over single BN NP for 20  $\mu\text{m}$ -thick (a) 1 wt.% and (b) 10 wt.% PE/BN NC. (c) Evolution of  $a_{\Delta\phi}$  as function of the interphase thickness and permittivity with: NC thickness = 20  $\mu\text{m}$ , BN NP radius = 20 nm and BN  $\epsilon_r = 4$ )

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