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The Electrolytic Aluminum-Oxide Rectifier

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The rectifying property of electrolytic Aluminum-Oxide is obliged to a double layer made between negative ions, which are adsorbed on oxide film in electrolytic solution, and positive charges induced in metal by them. A relation of electric resistance with applied voltage is obtained, and it is shown that current carriers in Al₂O₃ are Al⁺ ions and the film of Al₂O₃ is about 10⁻⁶ cm in thickness.

I. Introduction

It is well known that certain metals, notably aluminum and tantalum, as anode in a suitable electrolyte become coated with a thin oxide film, and then exhibit rectifying properties: the currents are very small for the aluminum positively charged with respect to the solution, while for opposite polarity they may be very large.

According to MIYAZAWA the process of forming an oxide film is caused by Al ions flowing from the aluminum through the oxide into the solution under the influence of the high electric field in the layer and combining with oxygen ions, the thickness of the oxide film increases. For constant applied voltage the current decreases exponentially with time until a small current of less than a microampere per cm² remains flowing, so that after several hours remarkable increase of the thickness cannot be measured. The thickness of the layer is proportional to the formation voltage and of the order of 10⁻⁵ cm—10⁻⁶ cm. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the mechanism of the electric conductivity of the aluminum rectifier.

II. The Experimental Data

The oxide film is formed on an aluminum plate in a solution of borax (4gr./200cc) and a carbon electrode is used as cathode.
The representative relationship between applied voltage (below the formation voltage and resistance per cm² of the film on an aluminum anode) is shown in Fig. 1. The exact values of resistance are somewhat unstable, especially in low voltages. But the most stable curves of which we obtained are shown. In Fig. 1 the resistance-voltage curves I, II, III are corresponding to the specimens of formation voltages of 95 volt/one hour, 49 volt/one hour and 24.5 volt/3 hours.

From these curves the maximum resistances are 42MΩ, 30MΩ and 16MΩ and the corresponding applied voltages are 1.6 volt, 1.25 volt and 1.0 volt respectively. The coated surface is seen to be coloured and the thickness l of the film is estimated from the capacity C, by setting

\[ l = \frac{\varepsilon}{4\pi C}, \]

where \( \varepsilon \) is the dielectric constant, which we may take to be of the order of 10. For the specimens I, II, and III in Fig. 1 the capacities are 0.0650 μf/cm², 0.125 μf/cm² and 0.197 μf/cm² and, therefore, their thicknesses are estimated as 1.31 \times 10^{-5} \text{cm}, 0.705 \times 10^{-5} \text{cm} and 0.502 \times 10^{-5} \text{cm}.

III. Mechanism of the Electric Conductivity

It is shown that the application of a positive potential to the aluminum results in a high resistance, whereas the application of negative potential results only in very low resistance. The rectification may be based on the oxide layer and the negative ions which are adsorbed on the surface of the layer.

If we assume that the electrons carry the current moving through the uniform \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \) layer, and the rectifying action is occurred between \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \) oxide layer, and the Al metal, so the aluminum must be negative in the blocking direction, because \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \) is the N-type semi-conductor. If we assume the other case in which the current carrier is electron and the rectification takes place at the contact of \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \) and the negative ions on the surface of \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \), so the electrons escape from the negative ions and oxygen gas should be produced. But, in practice, we can see only a stream of very minute gas bubbles on the anode. If the above mentioned assumption is correct the amount of oxygen gas must be the half
of the hydrogen gas, so we cannot assume that the current carrier is the electron in the blocking direction.

For the previous reason, it is supposed that the Al ions carry the current and at the same time form the oxide layer. When the thickness of the layer reaches the value of the order of $10^{-6}$ cm, the rate of growth becomes negligible small. The Al ions seem to move through the oxide under the influence of an electric double layer, which is formed by the negative ions in contact with Al$_2$O$_3$ and the induced positive charge on the surface of the aluminum. In view of this model Morr's theory of rectifier is applicable.\(^{(2)}\)

Let $v$ be the mobility and $D$ the diffusion coefficient of an aluminum ion. Let $x$ denote distance measured from the metal surface into the oxide layer, and let $n(x)$ be the density of the stoichiometric excess aluminum ions. Then the current $j$ per square centimeter in the oxide layer under the influence of the electric field strength $F'$ is given by

$$j = n(x)evF' - De(dn/dx),$$

where $e$ is the electric charge of an aluminum ion. Integrating this equation for $n$, and making use of the Einstein equation

$$v/e = D/kT$$

we obtain

$$n(x) = j/evF' + A \exp (eF'x/kT),$$

where $A$ is a constant. At $x=0$ and $x=l$ the value of $n(x)$ becomes

$$n(0) = j/evF' + A$$

and
Under these boundary conditions the current $j$ can be written as

$$j = \frac{evF' \{n(0) \exp(eF'/kT) - n(l)\}}{\exp(eF'/kT) - 1}.$$  

(7)

$F'$ can be separated into two parts; one is external voltage $F'$ and the other induced voltage $F_0$ by the presence of negative ions on the surface of Al$_2$O$_3$. $F_0$ is determined by the density of negative ions and increases somewhat with increasing the current, but it will be nearly constant to changes of barrier thickness if the same electrolyte electrode are used. Therefore $F'$ and $j$ are

$$F' = F + F_0,$$  

(8)

and

$$j = \frac{ev(F_0 + F) \{n(0) \exp(e(F_0 + F)/kT) - n(l)\}}{\exp(e(F_0 + F)/kT) - 1}.$$  

(9)

In the absence of an external field, the current becomes zero, so

$$n(l) = n(0) \exp(eF'/kT)$$  

(10)

and

$$j = \frac{ev(F_0 + F)n(0) \exp(eF_0/kT) \{\exp(eF_0/kT) - 1\}}{\exp(eF_0/kT) - 1}.$$  

(11)

Under the condition $e(F_0 + F)/kT$ at room temperature the equation (11) can be written as

$$j = ev(F_0 + F)n(0) \{1 - \exp(-eF_0/kT)\}.$$  

(12)

If we consider the image force by the aluminum metal, the height of the potential barrier which the Al ions must overcome from the Aluminum to the oxide layer, reduced by

$$e^\frac{3}{2} Fv^\frac{1}{2} e^{-\frac{1}{2}} = e^\frac{3}{2} (F_0 + F)^{\frac{1}{2}} e^{-\frac{1}{2}}$$  

(13)

Thus $n_0$ in the equation (12) should be replaced by $n(0) \exp\{e^\frac{3}{2} (F_0 + F)^{\frac{1}{2}} / e^\frac{1}{2} \}$, and the expression for the current becomes

$$j = ev(F_0 + F)n(0) \exp\{e^\frac{3}{2} (F_0 + F)^{\frac{1}{2}} / e^\frac{1}{2} \} \{1 - \exp(-eF_0/kT)\}$$  

(14)

and resistance
\[
\rho = \frac{1}{\text{ev} n(0)} \frac{F}{F_0 + F'} \exp \left\{ -\frac{e^3}{\text{ev}} \frac{(F_0 + F')^{\frac{3}{2}}}{\text{n}^3 kT} \right\} \exp \left( -\frac{-eF'}{kT} \right),
\]

(15)

where \(F'\) is great compared with 0.1 volt. So it is

\[\exp \left( -\frac{-eF'}{kT} \right) \ll 1,\]

and

\[
\rho = \frac{1}{\text{ev} n(0)} \frac{F}{F_0 + F'} \exp \left\{ -\frac{e^3}{\text{ev}} \frac{(F_0 + F')^{\frac{3}{2}}}{\text{n}^3 kT} \right\}. \quad (16)
\]

In this equation \(F\) and \(F_0\) per unit length are replaced by the actual terminal voltage of the layer.

In our experiment the specimen II showed the most stable results, so that we compared the formula (16) with the curve II in Fig. 1 and determined the \(n(0)\) and \(F'\).

In the equation (16) \(e\) is the charge of an aluminum ion, but when the stoichiometric excess \(\text{Al}^{+++}\) are present, there will be a tendency that the \(\text{Al}^{+++}\) ion attracts more electrons around it and becomes probably \(\text{Al}^+\) or \(\text{Al}^{++}\). If, therefore, \(\text{Al}^+\) is the current carrier, \(e = e'\), i.e. \(e' = 4.8 \times 10^{-10} \text{c.g.s.e.s.u.}\). The mobility of \(\text{Al}\) ion, \(v = v, \exp (-U/kT)\), is about \(1.7 \times 10^{-8} \text{cm/sec-volt at the}\) temperature of 291°K, when we adopt in ionic crystal the usual values of \(v\), which is 0.5 cm/sec, and \(U\) 10,000 cal/mol.

\(F_0\) and \(n(0)\) are determined by making the equation (16) in agreement with the experimental curve of the specimen II at its maximum value. The maximum resistance of the specimen II is \(30 \times 10^6 \Omega/\text{cm}^2\) at \(F = 1.25\) volt, so

\[
F_0 = 2.04 \text{ volt}
\]

(17)

and

\[
n(0) = 1.83 \times 10^{10}/\text{cm}^2.
\]

(18)

\(N\) is estimated to be of the order of \(1.1 \times 10^{10}/\text{cm}^2\) from the equation

\[
F_0/l = 4\pi e N,
\]

(19)

where \(N\) is the number of ions absorbed on \(\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\) surface. The number of excess \(\text{Al}\) ions on the contact surface between \(\text{Al}\) and \(\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\) can be determined by the energy required to remove an \(\text{Al}\) ion from \(\text{Al}\) to \(\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3\), but it cannot be obtained exactly. Assumed now \(e = 2e'\), i.e. \(\text{Al}^{++}\) are the current carrier, \(n(0)\) becomes roughly \(10^{10}/\text{cm}^2\); this seems too small. Accordingly we must assume that
the conductivity is caused by Al$^+$ ions.

Introducing the values of (17) and (18) into the equation (16), so it is

\[ \rho_{II} = 2.01 \times 10^9 (F/F + 2.04) \exp \{-1.79 (F + 2.04)^{\frac{3}{2}}\} \Omega/cm. \]  \hspace{1cm} (19)

This is shown in Fig. 1. In the case of the specimen I and III the capacity is 0.0556 \( \mu \)F/cm and 0.197 \( \mu \)F/cm and hence the thickness is 1.31 \( \times 10^{-5} \) cm and 0.0502 \( \times 10^{-5} \) cm. \( F_0 \) and \( n_0 \) are used in this case also the same value of specimen II, because they may be independent on the changes of the barrier thickness as obviously mentioned if the same electrolyte and electrode are used. We obtain

\[ \rho_{II} = 2.01 \times 10^9 (F/F + 2.04) \exp \{-1.37 (F + 2.04)^{\frac{3}{2}}\} \Omega/cm. \]  \hspace{1cm} (20)

and

\[ \rho_{III} = 2.01 \times 10^9 (F/F + 2.04) \exp \{-2.13 (F + 2.04)^{\frac{3}{2}}\} \Omega/cm. \]  \hspace{1cm} (21)

\( \rho_I \) and \( \rho_{III} \) are represented in Fig. 1. The reasons for the discrepancy between the theoretical and experimental values are probably that (1) the thickness of the layer is not obtained exactly, (2) \( F_0 \) is not constant in practice, (3) the electronic current is neglected. Especially the electronic current from negative ions increases with increasing the applied voltages, so that the experimentally obtained resistance is lower than the theoretical value.

Let \( \rho_I \) coincide with the observed \( \rho \), the thickness becomes \( 0.9 \times 10^{-4} \) cm for the same value of \( n_0 \) and \( F_{II} \), and this is a reasonable value.

The relation between the thickness of the oxide layer \( l \) and \( F_{II} \), at which the resistance exhibits the maximum value, is obtained from the equation (16)
Applying again $F_0 = 2.04$ volt, it is obtained for $l$

$$l = 0.137 \times (2.04 + F_M) F_M^2.$$

Fig. 2. represents a good agreement with experimental results.

References


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