The Atomic and Electronic Structure of the Dynamically Formed Cu/Cu₂O Interface Structure

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Classical theories [1] of oxidation assume uniform film growth with migrating ions, defects and charged species. This description misses the essential chemical and electronic details of how the oxygen and metal atom convert to a metal-oxide. To understand the kinetics of this transformation requires examining the dynamically formed metal/oxide interface at the nanometer scale and below.

Copper is selected as the model metal system. We have extensive previous work on initial stage of Cu oxidation by in situ ultra-high vacuum transmission electron microscopy UHV-TEM [2]. Past research on the initial stages of oxidation revealed that the predominant mechanism of transport, nucleation and growth of the oxide is oxygen surface diffusion[3, 4], but the details of how the metal and oxygen atoms convert to oxide along the interface is missing from this simplistic description. Also, the precise description of the interface will be directly correlated with electronic structure (ES) theoretical modeling of the interface, where the correct ES description of the interface will provide interface energies and the dynamic charge distribution across the interface needed for the potentials that will be used in molecular dynamic (MD) simulations of oxidation. Experimental determined interface structure is the critical first step of the theoretical model of oxidation mechanisms.

In this study, the Cu films used to develop Cu₂O were produced by e-beam evaporation 99.999% Cu pellets on irradiated SrTiO₃ (100) surface. The Cu (100) film is about 5000Å in thickness. The oxide island was formed by in situ oxidation of single crystal Cu (100) thin films, shown in Figure 1. The Cu/Cu₂O interface was created by oxidation of Cu (100) film at P(O₂) =8×10⁻⁴ torr for 20 minutes at 350°C. A dual-beam focused ion beam (FIB) instrument was utilized to select an oxide island, slice through it, and thin the interface. High resolution TEM (HREM) observations shown in Figure 2 revealed an interfacial zone with a thickness approximate 3 nm. Further HREM analysis showed that the distance between the Cu₂O {110} planes decreases with increasing distance from the interface while the Cu₂O {100} plane-spacing increases with increasing distance from the interface. Initial EELS investigations revealed an interfacial region of 3-6nm thickness where the oxidation states changed from Cu to Cu⁺¹, suggestive of metastable Cu oxides forming along the interface.

References
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FIG. 1. Cu$_2$O triangle islands are formed by oxidation of Cu (100) film at P(O$_2$) =$8 \times 10^{-4}$ torr for 20 minutes at 350°C.

FIG. 2. HREM on the Cu$_2$O/Cu interface structure. The interfacial zone is about 3 nm thick as indicated by the parallel red lines.