

Direct Synthesis of Ethanol over a Cu-Zn Catalyst in the Liquid Phase

Michel Simon,^a André Mortreux,^b and Francis Petit^{b*}

^a Norsolor, Centre de Recherche Nord, BP 57, 62670 Mazingarbe, France

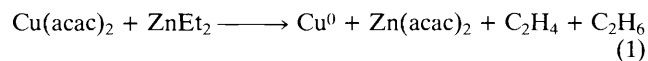
^b Laboratoire de Chimie Organique Appliquée, UA CNRS 402, ENSCL, UST LILLE Flandres Artois, BP 108, 59652 Villeneuve d'Ascq Cédex, France

Cu-Zn and Cu-Al catalysts generated by reduction of Cu(acac)₂ (acac = acetylacetonato) with ZnEt₂ or AlEt₃, are shown to produce oxygenated compounds from syngas in the liquid phase under pressure; high selectivities for ethanol are observed, especially with the Cu-Zn system (45.7 mol%) in the early stages of the reaction.

Cu-Zn Catalysts give very high selectivity in the gas phase synthesis of methanol from syngas.¹ However, the direct catalytic synthesis of higher alcohols from CO and H₂ using these copper based catalysts requires alkaline promoters, together with high temperatures and pressures. Under these conditions, a 20–30% yield of higher alcohols is obtained.² Another heterogeneous system gives rise to higher selectivities towards heavy alcohols,³ but additional transition metal salts are necessary; in these cases yields of up to 30–40% C₂+ alcohols are obtained. Our earlier work on the synthesis of cobalt catalysts for the catalytic production of light olefinic hydrocarbons^{4,5} and the observation that small amounts of linear alcohols are produced under more drastic conditions⁶ prompted us to extend this method of generating catalyst precursors to the Cu-Zn system, in order to produce reduced Cu moieties together with an oxidized form of Zn, which appears to be the combination required for the synthesis of alcohols from syn gas.

The synthesis of this new catalyst was performed as previously described for cobalt.⁵ A pink solution of Cu(acac)₂ (acac = acetylacetonato) (38 mmol) in dry benzene (200 ml) was mixed with a solution of butadiene (300 mmol, large excess) in the same solvent (10 ml) in a Schlenk tube at room temperature under nitrogen atmosphere, and cooled to ca. 0°C. Pure ZnEt₂ (39 mmol) was then added at room temperature with a hypodermic syringe through a septum over 1 min. During this process, the solution became dark brown

and remained homogeneous, and a mixture of C₂H₄ and C₂H₆ was evolved. This is consistent with the fact that Cu(acac)₂ is reduced,⁷ a process for which reaction (1) can be proposed, as for the synthesis of naked nickel from Ni(acac)₂ and Al-Et₂OEt.[†] Owing to the production of zerovalent Cu by this process, buta-1,3-diene must be introduced in order to prevent copper precipitation.⁸ In this case, solubilization of Cu⁰ occurs by complexation with the diene, most likely via production of a π-allyl intermediate.⁹



After 10 min stirring at 0°C, *o,o'*-terphenyl (50 g) was introduced into the Schlenk tube. Dissolution of this compound was followed by transfer to an autoclave under H₂, where the solution was warmed slowly to 260°C.‡ During this

[†] When the reduction of Cu(acac)₂ with ZnEt₂ is conducted without buta-1,3-diene, copper precipitates on the side of the Schlenk tube. This catalyst then gives essentially CH₄ from CO/H₂ under the same conditions.

[‡] The initial benzene solvent was evaporated under H₂ over 3–4 h. The reactor was then heated from ca. 100 to 260°C over 4 h under H₂. At this stage, H₂ was continuously passed through the autoclave and the exit gases analysed by g.c. This treatment was stopped when no more secondary products were formed, after about 12 h.

Table 1. Catalytic results for hydrogenation of CO on Cu–Zn based catalysts in the liquid phase.

Run number	Cu(acac) ₂ –ZnEt ₂ ^a				Cu(acac) ₂ –AlEt ₃ ^b		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
T/°C	260	260	280	300	260	270	300
p/atm	60	60	60	80	60	60	60
Space velocity ^c /h ⁻¹	193	401	396	2038	225	567	202
Turnover rate ^d /h ⁻¹	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.11	0.02	0.04	0.06
Selectivity							
Hydrocarbons ^e	7.3	18.5	36.7	51.6	48.4	50.9	65.1
Oxy products ^e	86.3	69.7	44.3	35.5	33.8	31.1	24.7
CO ₂ ^e	6.4	11.8	19.0	12.9	17.8	18.0	10.2
MeOH ^f	31.9	36.3	93.4	94.5	67.5	73.9	60.9
EtOH ^f	45.7	57.2	6.2	5.1	21.4	21.2	29.7
Pr ⁿ OH ^f	Trace	0.1	0.15	0.1	0.6	1.4	0.8
Bu ⁿ OH ^f	Trace	0.1	0.05	0.05	1.1	1.1	0.9
Branched alcohols ^f	0.3	—	—	0.1	Trace	Trace	—
MeCHO ^f	1.2	1.7	0.15	0.05	0.9	0.5	1.1
MeCO ₂ Me ^f	2.0	1.0	—	0.05	2.1	0.4	2.0
MeCO ₂ Et ^f	18.9	3.6	—	—	0.4	Trace	0.5
Ketones ^f	—	—	0.05	0.05	6.0	1.5	4.1

^a Cu(acac)₂ (38 mmol), ZnEt₂ (39 mmol), butadiene (300 mmol); for each run H₂:CO = 1; reaction time = 60 min.

^b Cu(acac)₂ (38 mmol), AlEt₃ (26 mmol), butadiene (264 mmol); for each run; H₂:CO = 2; reaction time = 60 min.

^c ml of syngas × (ml of liquid phase)⁻¹ × h⁻¹.

^d Cmmol × (Cu mmol)⁻¹ × h⁻¹.

^e Selectivities expressed in C₁ units.

^f Selectivities expressed in mol% within the oxyproducts.

process, byproducts were formed and detected by g.l.c., mainly (Me)₂CO, CH₄, and C₂H₆. This corresponds to hydrogenolysis of Zn(acac)₂, which affords ZnO together with the same product mixture. § The homogeneous solution was transformed into a slurry, in which CO hydrogenations were conducted under dynamic conditions. The results are given in Table 1. Hydrocarbons, CO, CO₂, and H₂ were analysed by on-line g.l.c., the oxygenated products were trapped before analysis. Although the conversion is lower than that observed using cobalt catalysts,⁶ it appears that ethanol is produced with good selectivity in the early stages of the process. 86% of consumed CO is converted to oxygenated products at the beginning of the reaction, but this selectivity decreases to 35% after 10 h. Of the oxygenates, ethanol is produced with a ca. 40–60% molar selectivity on a fresh catalyst, as after a few hours, methanol becomes the major product. Other experiments have shown that modification of the H₂:CO ratio does not significantly affect the oxygenate selectivity and overall activity.¹⁰

Upon using AlEt₃ instead of ZnEt₂ as reducing agent, the selectivity to oxygenates is reduced. However, the ethanol production remains quite high, even for long periods (run 7, the results are those obtained after 30 h). X-Ray photoelectron spectroscopic (x.p.s.) analysis of the used catalysts shows that the amount of stable Cu⁺ (915, 9 eV) is greater in Cu–Zn than Cu–Al mixtures; in accordance with previous investigations reported by Herman *et al.*,¹¹ the active species in these systems may be Cu⁺ dissolved in the ZnO lattice which favours MeOH production.¹²

The ability of the Cu–Zn combination to produce ethanol thus decreased with time to that of a classical methanol synthesis. However, at least in the early stages of the catalytic reaction, the reaction produces ethanol with good selectivity.

This is an unprecedented and rather unexpected result, which may be enhanced by the introduction of additional transition metals, which are known to favour such reactions.¹³

The authors thank NORSOLOR Co. for permission to publish this work, Dr. Gengembre for skilful assistance in x.p.s. analysis, and the Ministère de la Recherche et de la Technologie (Contract G.I.P. no. 84 F 0667) for financial support.

Received, 30th July 1987; ¶Com. 8/03027H

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§ The products acetone, methane, and ethane begin to appear at temperatures as low as 180°C; X-ray analysis of the resultant solid clearly shows that ZnO is produced.

¶ Revised version of Com. 1109 received 1st July 1988.