Lithium Permeation through Thin Lithium–Silicon Films for Battery Applications Investigated by Neutron Reflectometry

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In the ongoing search for new negative electrode materials for lithium-ion batteries, amorphous silicon with a theoretical specific capacity of almost 4000 mAh g⁻¹ is still one of the most promising candidates. In order to optimize cycling behavior, prelithiation of silicon is discussed as possible solution. Yet, little is known about kinetics in the Li-Si system, especially with a low lithium content. Using neutron reflectometry as a tool, lithium permeation through amorphous LiₓSi layers was probed during annealing. From the results a lithium permeability (diffusivity × solubility) of \( P = (3.3 \pm 0.9) \times 10^{-22}\) m² s⁻¹ is derived for LiₓSi (\( x \approx 0.1\)), which is identical to that of pure amorphous silicon.

**Introduction**

The performance of lithium-ion batteries is to a large extent determined by lithium diffusion in the electrolyte and in the electrode materials. Thus, diffusivities have a major influence on charging and discharging rates, maximum capacity, self-discharge, power density, and cycling stability.[1,3] Silicon, with a high theoretical capacity of almost 4000 mAh g⁻¹, is under investigation as a possible anode material.[2] The main hindrance for the commercial application of silicon as an electrode material is its extreme volume expansion during lithiation and the connected stress formation and electrode degradation.[3,4] A possible solution is using nanostructured materials in order to minimize stress. To this end, nanowires, nanotubes, and nanoparticles as well as thin films are used.[1,4,5] The improved surface-to-volume ratio in these materials are beneficial for the mitigation of stresses occurring during de-/lithiation. In addition, reducing the lateral dimensions leads to improved electrical contact and a more effective mass transport via diffusion due to the smaller diffusion lengths needed for penetrating the electrode material.[5,9] Even more promising than crystalline silicon (c-Si) is its amorphous modification. This is mainly due to a reversibility of shape and volume changes during electrode cycling because of a more homogeneous expansion and contraction of amorphous silicon.[5,9] In this context, an important question is also whether electrode lithiation is a lithium-diffusion- or inter-face-reaction-controlled process.[8,9] Consequently, a reliable determination of atomic/ionic transport properties is highly desirable.

In order to investigate atomic transport properties, the experimental method described here has already been used to probe pure amorphous silicon (a-Si).[10] However, as amorphous silicon electrodes are lithiated, transport occurs mainly in LiₓSi phases or along LiₓSi interfaces, both exhibiting different structural properties than pure a-Si.[11] While lithium diffusion in various crystalline LiₓSi phases was already probed in the literature by NMR and electrochemical methods,[12–15] no information about amorphous LiₓSi with small values of \( x \) is available. Combining the method presented in Ref. [10] with the production of LiₓSi layers with a defined small value of \( x \) yields an opportunity to further advance knowledge in this field.

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**Results and Discussion**

As argued before, lithium transport is a decisive factor in battery performance.\[^{[8]}\] Transport through a certain layer (e.g., of composition Li\(_x\)Si) is governed by the permeability, \(P\), that can be described as the product of the solubility, \(S\), of the transported species in the transport medium and the diffusivity, \(D\). This can be expressed as \(P = S \cdot D\).\[^{[17]}\] The solubility used here is a unitless quantity, calculated as the number of lithium atoms solute in the Li\(_x\)Si phase divided by the total number of atoms. In order to measure lithium permeabilities and thus also diffusivities in Li\(_x\)Si, multilayer samples were prepared (see Figure 1), which consisted of LiNbO\(_3\) layers separated by Li\(_x\)Si intermediate layers with \(x \approx 0.1\). The LiNbO\(_3\) layers are alternatingly isotope-enriched (\(^{6}\)LiNbO\(_3\) or \(^{6}\)LiNbO\(_3\), nat: \(92.5\%\) \(^{7}\)Li), while Li\(_x\)Si always exhibits the natural lithium abundance: \(^{7}\)Li. The deposited structure is schematically depicted in Figure 1, and the resulting depth distribution of scattering length densities as deduced from neutron reflectivity experiments is shown in Figure 2 while further details can be found in the Experimental Section. In this setup, amorphous LiNbO\(_3\) serves solely as lithium tracer reservoir. Amorphous LiNbO\(_3\) is a solid electrolyte, exhibiting a high lithium-ion conductivity and diffusivity\[^{[18,19]}\] while still retaining a rigid Nb-O skeleton\[^{[20]}\] which makes it ideally suited for these experiments. In principle, also other types of materials can be used as tracer reservoirs. The sample design is tailored to neutron reflectometry measurements, which is best explained through Figure 3a. While the isotope contrast from the alternating deposition of \(^{7}\)LiNbO\(_3\) and \(^{6}\)LiNbO\(_3\) gives rise to a distinct Bragg peak around \(Q_s \approx 0.019\) \(\text{Å}^{-1}\) in the reflectivity pattern, the chemical contrast between LiNbO\(_3\) and Li\(_x\)Si results in an additional Bragg peak at a higher scattering vector \(Q_s \approx 0.033\) \(\text{Å}^{-1}\). The continuous line in Figure 3a represents a fit based on calculations using the program Parratt32. With the variation of given input parameters this program uses the Parratt algorithm\[^{[21]}\] to simulate the resulting neutron reflectivity pattern. The parameters essential for the simulation are the structure of the sample as given in Figure 1, the thickness of the individual layers as assessed by previously determined sputter rates, and the calculated scattering length densities for the individual layers as shown in Figure 2. The as-deposited sample shown in Figure 3a exhibits the values previously given in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

It is apparent from Figure 3a and b that the overall fit to the experimental data (height and location of the Bragg peaks) is good, but also that some features are not perfectly represented by the simulation output (e.g., the width of the second Bragg peak and the background at higher \(Q_s\)). This can mainly be attributed to two simple facts. First, during the neutron experiments the sample is mounted on a ceramic heating plate. Because the absorption of neutrons in silicon is negligible there is a non-negligible contribution of diffusely scattered neutrons due to the heating plate. This adds to the (unknown) background intensity across the whole pattern, evident in the discrepancy between data and fit in the scattering vector range between the two peaks. Second, the fact that the simulation postulates an almost ideal and uniform thickness distribution of layers has to be taken into account. For the simulation of multilayer reflectivities in Parratt32 the repeating element of the sample, in this case the four-layer structure mentioned above, is described by a fixed set of values for thickness, scattering length densities, and roughness of each layer. Of course there is also a statistical variation of thickness and roughness of each individual layer that cannot be fully represented with this type of simulation. However, the alternative route of using a model that considers each layer individually also requires the vetting of many different possible solutions to simulate the given reflectivity pattern due to too many free parameters for the fitting procedure. In the given data set this fact is responsible for the apparent broadening of the chemical contrast peak when
compared to the simulation curve. The fact that after annealing (see Figure 3c) there is no observable decrease of the chemical peak, independent of the simulation, combined with the fact that the peak due to isotopic contrast decreases significantly means that the fitted data can be used for further analysis in the present case. Background and width of the Bragg peak do not enter the analysis for the determination of permeabilities, only the height of the Bragg peak.

Annealing the sample will lead to diffusion of $^6$Li (or $^7$Li) isotopes from the $^4$LiNbO$_3$ (or $^{6,8}$LiNbO$_3$) layers across the interfaces with the Li$_2$Si layers into and through the Li$_2$Si layers. It is assumed that no additional lithium (in significant amounts) is dissolved in Li$_2$Si and only an exchange of isotopes takes place. Because $x \approx 0.1$ and the solubility of lithium in pure a-Si is at least three orders of magnitude lower, as literature data on a-Si:H show,[22] it is safe to say that this only leads to a balancing of the isotope fractions in the lithium reservoirs over time. Figure 3b shows the reflectivity pattern of the same sample annealed for 195 min at 255 °C. The comparison of the data points from Figure 3a and 3b, displayed in Figure 3c, shows that the peak at higher values of $Q_z$ remains essentially unchanged during annealing. A slight decrease during the first annealing step is discussed below. Consequently, the chemical contrast, and thus the chemical composition (and lithium concentration) of the Li$_2$Si and Li$_2$NbO$_3$ layers is not modified significantly. Yet, as soon as $^7$Li/$^6$Li isotope interdiffusion sets in, the scattering length density (SLD) of the Li$_2$Si layer has to be slightly increased (from $2.05 \times 10^{-6}$ to $2.1 \times 10^{-6}$ Å$^{-2}$) in the simulation. This effect is attributed to the permeation of the Li$_2$Si layer by $^7$Li atoms and the removal of $^6$Li atoms, essentially increasing the $^7$Li content in the Li$_2$Si layer. The bound coherent scattering length of $^7$Li is 2.00 fm, while that of $^6$Li is $-2.22$ fm. Thus, even a slight increase in $^7$Li content is immediately noticeable. The concentration for each lithium isotope in Li$_2$Si (after annealing has started) is assessed to 50% on average. This effect leads to the already mentioned decrease of the Bragg peak at $Q_z \approx 0.03$ Å$^{-1}$ (a small, single digit percentage) only present during the first annealing step. No further change to the chemical contrast is observed during additional annealing. It has to be noted that this slight decrease cannot be explained with an increase of the absolute lithium concentration in the Li$_2$Si layer (increase of $x$). In that case a peak increase would be expected according to Parratt32 simulations.

At the same time, the peak resulting from the isotopic modulation of the LiNbO$_3$ layers at $Q_z \approx 0.019$ Å$^{-1}$ shows a distinct and continuous decrease during annealing. Simulation of the pattern of the annealed sample is done by adjusting the SLD of both LiNbO$_3$ layers according to a decrease (increase) of the $^6$Li content in the respective layer, starting from the values shown in Figure 2. The sum of the scattering length densities of the LiNbO$_3$ layers stays the same but the difference changes. This is concurrent with an advancing equilibration of isotope contents in the differently enriched layers without a change in total Li content and reflects the modification of the relative $^6$Li fraction in each LiNbO$_3$ layer. Details can be found in a publication by Hüger et al.[10]

In order to obtain first the permeability and then subsequently the diffusivity the approach introduced by Hüger et al.[10] was applied to the data. In a first step, $^6$Li and $^7$Li isotope fractions were determined for various annealing times via the simulation described above. The plot of these isotope fractions versus the annealing time is depicted in Figure 4. $^6$Li isotope fractions in the $^4$LiNbO$_3$ layer start out at a value of 92%, concurrent with the isotope enrichment of the layer. After a steady decrease for approximately 3 h of annealing, the $^6$Li fraction reaches a plateau at 68%. In parallel, the $^7$Li fraction in the $^4$LiNbO$_3$ starts out at 8%, increases at the same rate, and reaches its plateau at 32% also after 3 h. Except for the slightly different starting values, both lithium isotope fractions in the $^{6,8}$LiNbO$_3$ exactly mirror this behavior. It is further obvious from the plot that the lithium isotopes do not show a complete equilibration at about
In this case, $x_{\text{Li}}^{\text{final}}$ is the value at which the isotope equilibration stops and $B$ is the amplitude of the function.

Applying those fit functions to the data shown in Figure 4, in both cases a parameter $a = (1.5 \pm 0.2) \times 10^{-14}$ [i.e., $(4.2 \pm 0.6) \times 10^{-14}$] and, using Equation (2), a permeability of $P = (3.3 \pm 0.9) \times 10^{-21} \text{m}^2 \text{s}^{-1}$ is obtained. The lack of a complete equilibration to values of about 50% for both fractions might be due to a time-dependent diffusivity process or a two stage equilibration process, but further measurements are needed for clarification.

In the experimental study on a-Si, H"uger et al.\cite{10} a permeability of $(1.3 \pm 0.2) \times 10^{-21} \text{m}^2 \text{s}^{-1}$ was derived at 240°C using the analogous setup.\cite{21} A direct comparison to the value of $(3.3 \pm 0.9) \times 10^{-21} \text{m}^2 \text{s}^{-1}$ found in this study shows that the addition of about 10 at% of lithium to silicon in the Li, Si layer does not significantly change the permeability of the system. This result is astonishing because due to the higher lithium solubility that can be expected in Li, Si ($S = 0.09$) compared to amorphous silicon containing some percent of hydrogen ($S = (2 \pm 1) \times 10^{-3}$ at 240°C), an about three orders of magnitude lower diffusivity can be expected for Li, Si using $D = P/S$. This is an obviously extreme discrepancy to previous findings in literature as shown in Figure 5.

Larue\cite{22} and Pell\cite{23} have reported on lithium diffusion in c-Si at temperatures slightly above and below the 255°C used in the experiments presented here. However, comparing the extrapolated data gives a good agreement of their findings to each other. The addition of lithium to the crystalline matrix was directly probed by Dunst et al.\cite{24} who, using NMR at $-30$°C, found for electrochemically amorphousized Li, Si a diffusivity that surpasses the extrapolated value from Larue\cite{22} and Pell\cite{23} by about five orders of magnitude. Kuhn

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**Figure 4.** Relative $^6\text{Li}$ and $^7\text{Li}$ isotope fractions of both LiNbO$_3$ reservoirs, shown as a function of annealing time. Data are obtained from the Parratt32 simulations as explained in the text. Errors were deduced using Parratt32 by varying Li isotope contents of the Li isotope layers until an increase of $\chi'$ (representing the quality of the fit) of 10% was reached. The scattering length densities were translated into Li isotope fractions resulting in an absolute error of no more than 5%. The fit function is an exponential decay according to Equation (3).

**Figure 5.** Literature data on Li diffusivities in crystalline silicon (c-Si) and various crystalline and amorphous Li, Si phases as a function of inverse temperature. Data points for crystalline phases are represented by squares, amorphous phases by circles. The data clearly illustrates the fact that the addition of Li into Si leads to enhanced Li diffusivities. Especially recent theoretical calculations\cite{23,24} emphasize the increase of $D$ with the increase of $x$ in Li, Si.
et al.\textsuperscript{[23]} reported a diffusivity in Li$_3$Si, also obtained by NMR at 150°C that is still larger than the extrapolated values by three orders of magnitude. Even the findings by Wen et al. in various crystalline LiSi phases\textsuperscript{[24]} at 400°C still surpass the extrapolated c-Si by about one order of magnitude. So at least for c-Si it is indicated that the addition of a significant amount of lithium enhances the lithium diffusivity. Additionally, ab initio molecular dynamics calculations done for various compositions of Li$_x$Si alloys showed a strong dependence of the lithium ion diffusivity on the lithium content of the alloy.\textsuperscript{[25]} Diffusivities increased by two orders of magnitude at room temperature by increasing $x$ from 1 to 3.75. Similar calculations by Chiang et al.\textsuperscript{[26]} show a comparable behavior for amorphous Li$_x$Si with diffusivities also increasing by one order of magnitude with an increase in $x$ from 1 to 3.75, showing a pronounced dependence on lithium content.

These literature data indicate that the addition of Li to silicon (Si$-\text{Li}_x$Si) or the increase of $x$ in Li$_x$Si leads to enhanced lithium diffusivities in the material. While literature data are diffusivities, the data presented here are permeabilities because the necessary solubilities to calculate the diffusivities are not known.

Concerning the literature work, the most likely explanation for our results is that the sample with a low lithium content of $x \approx 0.1$ in Li$_x$Si does not exhibit a percolation path for lithium diffusion along a silicon–lithium network if the lithium atoms are statistically distributed in the silicon matrix. Consequently, diffusion of lithium will take place along a pure a-Si network. This will explain the similar permeability. The diffusing lithium only penetrates along a-Si domains with the same solubility and diffusivity as in pure a-Si. Consequently, the same permeability as reported by Hüger et al.\textsuperscript{[10,20]} is measured within error limits (neglecting the slight temperature difference of 15°C).

### Conclusions

Lithium permeation through thin Li$_x$Si layers sandwiched between isotopically modulated LiNbO$_3$ layers, serving as tracer reservoirs in a multilayer structure, was observed using neutron reflectometry with a rapid thermal annealing setup. Two distinct Bragg peaks are observable in the reflectivity pattern. One is attributable to the chemical contrast between the Li$_x$Si layers and the LiNbO$_3$ layer, the other to the isotope contrast between the $^{46}$LiNbO$_3$ and $^{48}$LiNbO$_3$ layers. Annealing at 255°C in argon atmosphere leads to lithium isotope interdiffusion through the Li$_x$Si layer from one inert LiNbO$_3$ layer to the other and, consequently, to a decrease in $^{67}$Li fractions in the LiNbO$_3$ layers. This in turn leads to a decrease of the corresponding peak, which can be used to assess lithium permeabilities of the Li$_x$Si layer. During the whole process, the chemical contrast remains unchanged, a fact that is reflected by a constancy of the corresponding reflectivity peak. The permeability of Li through Li$_x$Si with $x \approx 0.1$ at 255°C is found to be $P = (3.3 \pm 0.9) \times 10^{-21}$ m$^2$/s$^{-1}$ which is the same as that reported for pure a-Si. Thus, diffusion is expected to occur in pure a-Si domains and not along lithium–silicon-rich percolation paths.

### Experimental Section

#### Samples

The sample material used in this investigation was a multilayer arrangement consisting of five sets of [Li$_x$Si (8.5 nm)]$_{10}$LiNbO$_3$ (12.5 nm) [Li$_x$Si (8.5 nm)]$_{10}$LiNbO$_3$ (12.5 nm) units subsequently deposited by ion-beam sputtering onto an appropriate silicon wafer substrate and capped by an additional LiNbO$_3$ layer. The Li$_x$Si layers were prepared as described in a previous publication by reactive co-sputtering of lithium foil and a silicon wafer.\textsuperscript{[10]} The target design was modified in comparison to the original experiment\textsuperscript{[16]} so that a reduction of Li content in Li$_x$Si to about $x \approx 0.1$ was achieved, which was verified by secondary ion mass spectrometry measurements in combination with X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy. The corresponding data can be found in the Supporting Information. The amorphous LiNbO$_3$ layers were sputtered from two sintered polycrystalline targets exhibiting different lithium isotope enrichment but the layers still maintained a composition and isotope concentration close to the LiNbO$_3$ target material.\textsuperscript{[16]} Consequently, layers termed $^{46}$LiNbO$_3$ have a composition of $^{46}$Li$_{14.52}$Li$_{0.48}$NbO$_3$ while layers termed $^{48}$LiNbO$_3$ are composed of $^{48}$Li$_{14.52}$Li$_{0.48}$NbO$_3$. 

#### Preparation technique

Sputtering was done by using a commercial ion-beam sputter coater IBC 681 (Gatan, USA) with argon as sputter gas. The acceleration voltage was set to 5 kV with a beam current of 200 μA. Base pressure was below 5 × 10$^{-7}$ mbar and did not surpass 1 × 10$^{-4}$ mbar during deposition. The sputter coater was set up in an argon filled glovebox so as to minimize atmospheric contamination. All three targets were mounted in the coater at the same time. Consequently, deposition could be done without exposing the samples to anything but the conditions inside the sputter coater.

#### Annealing

Annealing was done in an AOS500 rapid thermal annealing setup (MBE components) which was modified to allow neutron reflectometry measurements without removing the sample from the oven. Thus, orientation and position of the sample were kept unchanged at all times during those measurements. In order to reduce diffuse scattering by the ceramic heating plate, an additional silicon wafer with a thickness of 1 mm was put below the sample. Notably, diffuse scattering was not avoided but only reduced. As a consequence, an additional calibration of this setup was performed to gauge the correct temperatures.

#### Neutron reflectometry

Neutron reflectometry measurements were performed at SINQ, Villigen, Switzerland, on the time-of-flight reflectometer AMOR in the recently implemented Selene setup.\textsuperscript{[29]} In comparison to the conventional setup of the instrument, where either angle or wavelength is kept fixed, incident angle and wavelength of the neutron beam can be varied at the same time. To achieve this, the wavelength is determined by time-of-flight, and the scattering
angle via a position sensitive detector. Additionally, the Selene waveguide provides a focused neutron beam with a wider divergence, that is, a wider range of incident angles. Consequently, measuring time is reduced by more than one order of magnitude for small values of $Q_v$.

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