A global view of the phase transitions of SnO$_2$ in rechargeable batteries based on results of high throughput calculations

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Lithium, sodium and magnesium have attracted wide attention as potential ions for rechargeable batteries. The Materials Project database of high throughput first principles calculations is used to investigate the phase transitions of SnO$_2$ during ion intercalation and extraction. Various intermediate phases are predicted to be formed during the first intercalation, whereas in later cycles other intermediate phases are encountered. The volume expansions after intercalation and extraction are analyzed. We show that different lithium and sodium oxide products found in recent experiments are due to different oxygen chemical potentials.

Results and discussion

The high throughput data forming the basis of our investigation are taken from the Materials Project database and were obtained by density functional theory as implemented in the Vienna Ab initio Simulation Package, using the generalized gradient approximation without and with the onsite Coulomb interaction. The calculations took into account spin-polarization and employed an energy cutoff of 520 eV. The number of points in the $k$-mesh was set to 1000 divided by the number of atoms in the unit cell. The Gibbs free energy is defined as $G(P, T) = U + PV - TS$, where $U$, $P$, $V$, $T$, and $S$ are the internal energy, pressure, volume, temperature, and entropy, respectively. In the alkali battery reactions, no gas phase reactants or products are involved and surfaces effects of the electrodes are not considered, so that $P = 0$ GPa and $T = 0$ K are valid approximations. Therefore, $G$ is given by the internal energy, which corresponds to the total energy of density functional theory.
We used the total energies $E_i$ (per atom) of the involved elements as the reference to define the formation energy $E = (E_{\text{tot}} - \sum E_i)/\sum N_i$ of a compound, where $E_{\text{tot}}$ is the total energy of the compound and $N_i$ is the amount of atoms in the compound. The structures of bulk lithium, sodium, and magnesium are shown in Fig. 1(a)–(c), respectively. It has been recently found that the reaction product after several cycles of lithiation and delithiation of $\beta$-Sn, SnS, and SnO$_2$ contains a mixture of $\beta$-Sn and $\alpha$-Sn, which are the two Sn polymorphs at ambient pressure. $\alpha$-Sn (Fig. 1(d)) is stable at temperatures below 13.2 °C and $\beta$-Sn (Fig. 1(e)) at temperatures up to 232 °C. We note that cubic $\alpha$-Sn is favored at small sizes. Sn nanostructures as a function of temperature and size have been investigated recently in ref. 38. The phase diagram of $\alpha$-Sn, O, and Li/Na/Mg is shown in Fig. 2 including all stable compounds found in high throughput calculations. The color indicates the formation energy per atom ($E$).

It has been conjectured that the first step of the lithiation process is the insertion of Li$^+$ into the SnO$_2$ lattice: SnO$_2$ + xLi$^+$ + xe$^-$ → Li$_x$SnO$_2$. However, what is the detailed phase evolution? The first lithiation line in Fig. 2(a) shows that there exist two lithium tin oxides, Li$_5$SnO$_3$ and Li$_{17}$SnO$_4$, see Fig. 3(c) and (d), which have not been characterized experimentally so far.

Li$_5$SnO$_3$ is obtained before Li$_8$SnO$_6$. Meanwhile, Sn and Li$_x$Sn are formed by means of irreversible conversion of SnO$_2$ into Sn and lithium oxide: SnO$_2$ + 4Li$^+$ + 4e$^-$ → 2Li$_2$O + Sn. Finally, there is a reversible alloying reaction: Sn + xLi$^+$ + xe$^-$ → Li$_x$Sn. All encountered structures are shown in Fig. 3. For sodiation there exist three intermediate phases (Na$_2$SnO$_3$, Na$_4$SnO$_4$, and Na$_4$SnO$_3$), see Fig. 4. Theoretically, all mentioned phases can form in Li/Na ion batteries, whereas experimentally it is challenging to identify them by conventional techniques, such as Raman spectroscopy and X-ray diffraction. However, identification can be achieved by in situ TEM, though the lithiation/sodiation front is tiny and the process is fast.

According to the phase diagram in Fig. 2(a), the final lithiation products are Li$_3$O and Li$_{17}$Sn. The voltage required for the initial lithiation from SnO$_2$ to Li$_5$SnO$_3$ ranges from 1.93 to 1.16 eV for different byproducts, see Table 1. The values are obtained as negative ratios of the change in $G$ and the number of alkali atoms transferred. It is known that Sn nanoparticles form during the first lithiation, while Li$_x$Sn forms without Sn nanoparticles using LiCoO$_2$ as the cathode and a liquid-based electrolyte. The different lithiation products can be attributed to the different experimental setups. The voltage for the second lithiation from Li$_5$SnO$_3$ to Li$_{17}$SnO$_4$ is lower as compared to that for the initial lithiation. For lithiation to Li$_2$O, the voltage ranges from 0.82 to 1.12 eV. We found that the final product is Li$_{17}$Sn$_4$. During delithiation, Li$_2$O is assumed to be transformed into LiO$_2$ and Li$_{17}$Sn$_4$ into Sn. While a transformation from Li$_2$O to Sn has already been reported, transformation from LiO to Li$_2$O has not been observed yet. The absence of Li$_2$O is explained by the fact that it will oxidize Li$_x$Sn and Sn to transfer to Li$_2$O. Therefore, Li$_2$O is always present. The intermediate phases in later cycles (Li$_2$Sn$_2$, Li$_3$Sn$_4$, and LiSn) are different from those during the first lithiation. The voltage profile of Li$_x$Sn shown in Fig. 5(a) is fully consistent with a previous report. Moreover, the reversibility of the Li$_x$Sn alloying process agrees with the cycling behavior observed in ref. 6 for SnO$_2$ anodes and the formation of Li$_2$O explains that experimentally the capacity of the battery is reduced after the first cycle.

For the first sodiation we found the products Na$_2$O and Na$_4$SnO$_3$, as identified earlier. According to Fig. 2(b), there are three intermediate phases (Na$_2$SnO$_3$, Na$_4$SnO$_4$, and Na$_4$SnO$_3$),
Fig. 3  Unit cells of (a) Li2O2, (b) LiO2, (c) Li3SnO2, (d) Li8SnO6, (e) LiSn, (f) Li12Sn15, (g) Li17Sn4, and (h) Li17Sn4. Green, gray, and red balls represent Li, Sn, and O atoms.

Fig. 4  Unit cells of (a) NaO2, (b) Na2O2, (c) Na2O, (d) Na4Sn3O8, (e) Na2SnO4, (f) Na2SnO5, (g) NaSn2, (h) NaSn, (i) Na9Sn4, and (j) Na15Sn4. Cyan, gray, and red balls represent Na, Sn, and O atoms.
### Table 1: Voltage for different reaction paths for lithiation

| Reaction | Voltage (eV) |
|----------|--------------|
| 4Li + 3SnO2 → 2Li2SnO3 + Sn      | 1.93         |
| 3Li + 3SnO2 → 2Li2SnO3 + LiSn   | 1.68         |
| 3Li + 15SnO2 → 10Li2SnO3 + Li13Sn3 | 1.39         |
| 11Li + 6SnO2 → 4Li2SnO3 + Li2Sn3 | 1.26         |
| 35Li + 12SnO2 → 8Li2SnO3 + Li13Sn3 | 1.16         |
| 4Li + 2Li2SnO3 → Li2SnO3 + Sn    | 1.36         |
| 3Li + 2Li2SnO3 → Li2SnO3 + LiSn | 1.22         |
| 33Li + 10Li2SnO3 → 5Li2SnO3 + Li13Sn3 | 1.05         |
| 15Li + 4Li2SnO3 → 2Li2SnO3 + Li13Sn3 | 0.95         |
| 33Li + 8Li2SnO3 → 4Li2SnO3 + Li13Sn3 | 0.88         |
| 3Li + 5Li2SnO3 → 15LiO + Li13Sn3 | -16.06        |
| 3Li + 2Li2SnO3 → 6LiO + Li13Sn3 | -6.27         |
| 9Li + 4Li2SnO3 → 12LiO + Li13Sn3 | -4.12         |
| 5Li + Li2SnO3 → 6LiO + LiSn     | 1.12          |
| 33Li + 5Li2SnO3 → 30LiO + Li13Sn3 | 0.97         |
| 5Li + 2Li2SnO3 → 12LiO + Li13Sn3 | 0.89         |
| 33Li + 4Li2SnO3 → 24LiO + Li13Sn3 | 0.82         |

### Table 2: Voltage for different reaction paths for sodiation

| Reaction | Voltage (eV) |
|----------|--------------|
| 4Na + 3SnO2 → Na4SnO3 + Sn          | 1.45         |
| 9Na + 8SnO2 → 2Na2SnO3 + NaSn2     | 1.34         |
| 5Na + 4SnO2 → 2Na2SnO3 + NaSn      | 1.25         |
| 25Na + 16SnO2 → 4Na2SnO3 + NaSn4   | 1.02         |
| 31Na + 16SnO2 → 4Na2SnO3 + NaSn4   | 0.85         |
| 4Na + NaSnO3 → 2Na2SnO3 + Sn       | 0.65         |
| 9Na + 2NaSn3O4 → 2Na2SnO3 + NaSn2  | 0.63         |
| 5Na + NaSnO3 → 2Na2SnO3 + NaSn      | 0.61         |
| 25Na + 4NaSnO3 → 8Na2SnO3 + NaSn4  | 0.52         |
| 31Na + 4NaSnO3 → 8Na2SnO3 + NaSn4  | 0.44         |
| 23Na + 4NaSnO3 → 12Na2O + NaSn5    | 0.08         |
| 11Na + 4NaSnO3 → 6Na2O + NaSn5     | -1.47        |
| 5Na + 4NaSnO3 → 6Na2O + NaSn5     | -5.50        |
| 17Na + 4NaSnO3 → 12Na2O + NaSn5    | 0.08         |
| 5Na + 4NaSnO3 → 6Na2O + NaSn5     | -3.36        |
| 3Na + NaSnO3 → 3Na2O + NaSn      | 0.05         |
| 5Na + 2NaSnO3 → 6Na2O + NaSn2     | -0.03        |
| 2Na + Na4SnO3 → 3Na2O + Sn      | -0.15        |

which have not been observed so far, see the structures in Fig. 4. The voltage required for the first sodiation turns out to be lower than that for the first lithiation (Tables 1 and 2). The lower voltages indicate that sodiation is slower than lithiation, as found earlier for SnO2 which is supported by the higher transition barrier of Na as compared to that of Li. Fig. 2(b) shows that the desodiation products are Na2O and Sn, as previously identified by TEM. There are Na2O2 as well as NaSn, NaSn, and NaSn intermediate phases and the voltage profile of NaSn in Fig. 5(b) is consistent with that reported in the literature.

Instead of LiO2, Li2O2 cell experiments found Li2O2 as the product by Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy and surface enhanced Raman spectroscopy. Therefore, there are reports about the formation of lithium superoxide (LiO2) in the cell, LiO2 is unstable and will disproportionate into Li2O2 and O2. Therefore, only Li2O2 and LiO2 appear in Fig. 3(a). According to the phase diagram in Fig. 2(b), there are three sodium oxide polymorphs (Na2O, NaO, and Na2O), for which the structures are displayed in Fig. 4(a)–(c). In situ TEM of sodiation of SnO2 nanowires found Na2O as the product whereas crystalline sodium superoxide (NaO2) was reported recently for a Na–O2 cell. The different alkali oxide products after intercalation can be attributed to the oxygen poor environment in the TEM experiments (high vacuum) and the oxygen rich environment in the Li/O2 cell. Voltage profiles of the Li2O and Na2O cells are shown in Fig. 5(d) and (e), respectively. The voltage for the formation of Li2O (2.8 eV) is consistent with the experimental value of 2.6 eV whereas that for the formation of Na2O (2.4 eV) exceeds the experimental value of 1.8 eV substantially.

Being an additional parameter of the ion battery performance, a large volume expansion indicates the high capacity of the anode but at the same time induces much damage. Since by ion intercalation into SnO2 the volume will change, we studied the ratio Vproducts/VSnO2, where Vproducts is the total volume of the products and VSnO2 is that of SnO2. We obtained values of 3.8/6.1 for Li/Na, which suggests a higher capacity for Na than for Li. For the extraction process, the result is 1.9/2.0 for Li/Na and thus more than 1, which indicates irreversibility for both Na and Li. The volume expansion after the first sodiation of a SnO2 nanowire is 4.7 which is less than the theoretical value, and 2.6 after the first desodiation, which exceeds the theoretical value of 2.0.
This discrepancy points to incomplete sodiation and desodiation in the experiment. Moreover, the volume expansion decreases for further sodiation and increases for further desodiation, which suggests the formation of intermediate structures that hinder the cycling and eventually result in failure of batteries. The formation of such structures also could be the origin of observed cracking. During a full cycle, the volume changes by a factor of 2.0 for Li and a larger factor of 3.0 for Na.

According to Fig. 2(c), there is only one intermediate phase for magnesiation (Mg2SnO4), see the structure in Fig. 6, and the products are MgO and Mg2Sn. Because there are no other magnesium oxide phases, it is difficult to transform MgO, see the MgO voltage profile in Fig. 5(f). By comparing Table 3 with Tables 1 and 2 we find that the voltage required for the first magnesiation is much higher than in the cases of lithiation and sodiation. The value of 5.5 eV is much higher than that found for lithiation and sodiation, which implies that SnO2 is not a suitable anode for magnesium ion batteries. Only one magnesium tin alloy (Mg2Sn) appears in Fig. 2(c). However, the Mg2Sn voltage is 0.3 eV and thus much lower than the values found for Li2Sn and Na2Sn. Therefore, it is expected that the products of demagnesiation are Sn and MgO. We obtained theoretical volume expansions of 3.1 and 2.0 for magnesiation and demagnesiation, respectively.

While our present study focuses on the phase transitions in the SnO2 electrode during alkali ion intercalation, typically also the interface between the electrolyte and the electrodes (both cathode and anode) plays an important role in the performance of batteries. For example, it has been demonstrated theoretically that the voltage depends on the surface charge density, which can explain differences between experimental values and the voltages calculated for bulk electrodes. Important challenges for the first principles modeling in this area have been reviewed very recently in ref. 50.

### Conclusions

Based on the results taken from the Materials Project database of high throughput first principles calculations, we have established the Sn, O, and Li/Na/Mg phase diagram for batteries based on SnO2. For the first intercalation, we predict intermediate phases (Li2SnO3 and Li4SnO6 for lithiation, Na4Sn3O8, Na4Sn2O6, and Na4SnO3 for sodiation, and Mg2SnO4 for magnesiation) which so far have not been verified experimentally. After full intercalation SnO2 is transformed into tin alloys (Li2Sn4, Na12Sn14, and Mg2Sn) and oxides (Li2O, Na2O, and MgO) and after full extraction the products are Sn and oxides (Li2O2, NaO2, and MgO). The volume expansion after Li/Na/Mg intercalation is predicted as 3.8/6.1/3.1 and that after extraction as 1.9/2.1/2.0. Different oxide products found in recent experiments on Li/Na air batteries and in in situ TEM on nanowires are attributed to different oxygen chemical potentials in the two experiments. Comparison of different reaction paths allows us to predict that an applied voltage experimentally will have a crucial effect on the final products, which is an important insight because voltage dependent investigations are still strongly limited today. We have demonstrated that the results of high throughput calculations can be used for predicting the phase transitions in batteries and thus pave the way to provide instructions for the development of novel battery concepts.

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