First Principles Study of the Li-Bi-F Phase Diagram and Bismuth Fluoride Conversion Reactions with Lithium

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Alternatives to Li-ion intercalation reactions have become the focus of considerable research efforts as the demand for higher energy density batteries continues to increase. One very promising alternative to intercalation is the conversion reaction in which Li$^+$ consumes the active electrode material, MX ($M$ representing a metal cation and $X$ representing the anion), reducing it to the metal, $M^0$, and a corresponding lithium compound, Li$_{x}X$.

In doing so, conversion reactions can take advantage of all energetically favorable valence states of the metal cation yielding specific capacities much higher than those of today’s electrode materials. The reversibility of these reactions has only been demonstrated in recent years with the use of very small nanoparticles (~1 to 20 nm) in intimate contact with one another. This approach was initially used to establish reversible conversion with metal oxides, but promptly applied to reversible conversion of metal sulfides and metal nitrides thereafter. In general, these are considered anodic materials because the conversion reactions occur below 2 V vs Li/Li$^+$ because of the more covalent nature of the metal–anion bonding. Consequently, only metal fluorides exhibit enough ionic character to yield high enough conversion reaction potentials to make them useful as cathodic materials. However, the inherently poor resistivity of fluorides requires an additional conductive matrix (e.g., carbon, MoO$_3$) to ensure reversibility. Doing so has enabled nanocomposites on several 3d transition-metal fluorides (i.e., Cr, Fe, Ni, and Cu) to display significant capacities.

$\text{BiF}_3$ has been an attractive cathode material for several decades because of its high theoretical conversion potential (3.21 V vs Li/Li$^+$) and considerable gravimetric (969 Wh/kg) and volumetric (8042 Wh/L) energy densities. However, only through the use of these nanocomposites has significant practical capacity (~271 mAh/g of BiF$_3$, corresponding to 90% theoretical capacity) been obtained. Utilizing a variety of characterization techniques, Bervas et al. indicated that BiF$_3$ directly converts to a LiF/Bi matrix via a two-phase reaction in which intermediate phases (with oxidation states between Bi$^{3+}$ and Bi$^0$) are not observed. They argued that pseudophase transitions in the voltage profiles of both the orthorhombic and tetragonal BiF$_3$ polymorphs are due to the varying electronic conductivity of the entire nanocomposite as metallic Bi is extruded (improving electronic conductivity) and consumed (making the nanocomposite more resistive). Regardless of the root cause for the pseudophase transitions, a significant voltage hysteresis is observed; an attribute shared among the variety of conversion reaction materials and generally attributed to the poor kinetics of electron conduction through the nanocomposite.

Recently we used first principles methods to investigate the conversion pathway of iron fluoride reacting with Li. In doing so we speculated that iron fluoride conversion initially follows a thermodynamically equilibrated pathway, but that the reaction quickly moves to a nonequilibrium phase space due to the significant difference in diffusivity between Li and Fe. Based on the hypothesis of a slowly diffusing Fe, a different reaction path can be defined for charge and discharge, resulting in hysteresis. An additional finding of that study was that the formation of very small Fe particles (e.g., 1 nm) causes the reaction voltage to significantly decrease from the bulk Fe value due to the substantial difference between the cohesive energy of bulk and nanosized Fe. In this article, we use first principles methods to study the equilibrium and nonequilibrium conversions of BiF$_3$ and to also investigate the modification of the reaction voltage as a function of Bi particle size.

**Methodology**

The first principles results in this article are based on the spin-polarized generalized gradient approximation to the density functional theory formalism using pseudopotentials generated by the projector-augmented wave method and implemented with the Vienna Ab Initio Simulation Package. Pseudopotentials contained the valence states 1s$^2$2s$^2$2p$^4$ for Li, 5d$^5$6s$^1$ for BiF$_3$, and 2s$^2$2p$^5$ for F (enabling lower lying d states to be treated as valence), and 2s$^2$2p$^6$ for Bi (enabling lower lying d states to be treated as valence), and 2s$^2$2p$^6$ for F. An energy cutoff of 550 eV (higher than the default value of 400 eV for fluorine) ensured plane-wave convergence, and Brillouin zone integration was performed on a 4 x 4 x 4 grid for all Li–Bi–F compounds or a 12 x 12 x 12 grid for Li and Bi metals. The total energy was minimized with the full relaxation of the atomic positions and cell parameters. For Bi nanoparticles only the Γ point was used in reciprocal space. As it is expected that Bi forms as very small clusters, we computed the energy of a spherical Bi particle with 1 nm diameter to explore the cohesive energy change with size and its effect on the reaction potential of BiF$_3$. The rhombohedral packing of bulk Bi (trigonal R$3\bar{m}$, SG no. 166) was employed because experimental evidence suggests that this symmetry is maintained for small Bi particles. The resulting cohesive energy was found to be 250 meV/atom lower than that calculated for bulk Bi.

The total energy of fluorine used to derive the Li–Bi–F phase diagram was determined from the experimental reaction enthalpy for the reaction

$$2\text{Li} + F_2 \rightarrow 2\text{LiF}$$

and the calculated energies for Li and LiF. This enabled the total energy of fluorine to be determined by fitting the total energies of an insulator (i.e., LiF) and a nontransition metal (i.e., Li) to the experimental reaction enthalpy, and minimized ab initio errors arising from the metal to anion charge transfer. The equivalent ab initio energy of F$_2$ was found to be ~2.784 eV/f.u. based on this method. Similarly, the total energy of bismuth used to derive the Li–Bi–F
phase diagram was determined from the experimental reaction enthalpy for the reaction

$$3\text{Li} + \text{BiF}_3 \rightarrow \text{Bi} + 3\text{LiF} \quad [3]$$

and the calculated energies for Li, BiF$_3$, and LiF. This enabled the total energy of Bi to be determined by fitting the total energies of two insulators (i.e., BiF$_3$ and LiF) and a nontransition metal (i.e., Li) to the experimental reaction enthalpy, thus minimizing ab initio errors arising from the significant difference between the electronic states in metallic and oxidized Bi.

### Structures Examined and the Predicted Li–Bi–F Ternary Phase Diagram

The total energies of all binary and ternary Li–Bi–F phases listed in the Inorganic Crystal Structures Database (ICSD) have been calculated. The ICSD contains three polymorphs of BiF$_3$ displaying space groups Pnma (no. 62), P43m (no. 215), and Fm3m (no. 225). An additional calculation of BiF$_3$ with the tysonite structure, from LaF$_3$, P3c1 (no. 165), was conducted as experimental efforts report the formation of this structure upon reconversion. Results of the total energy calculations confirmed that the orthorhombic Pnma structure, denoted o-BiF$_3$, was lowest in energy, while the tysonite phase (t-BiF$_3$) was the next highest in energy (132 meV/f.u. higher than o-BiF$_3$). Both structures were based on a central BiF$_3$ trigonal prism (outlined in dashed lines for o-BiF$_3$ in Fig. 1 A and B and t-BiF$_3$ in Fig. 1C and D) to which additional fluoride coordinated through the three rectangular faces in each polymorph and through the two triangular faces in the tysonite structure. The coordination of Bi to F in o-BiF$_3$ and t-BiF$_3$ was reduced from that of their respective prototypes, YF$_3$ and LaF$_3$, due to the stereochemically active lone pair on Bi. Figure 1 contrasts the ninefold coordination of the metal in YF$_3$ (Fig. 1 A), which exhibits metal-fluorine bonds in the range 2.281–2.538 Å, with the reduced eightfold coordination of Bi in o-BiF$_3$. The calculated M–F bond lengths listed in Table I show that the eight nearest-neighbor fluorine reside 2.265–2.520 Å from Bi, while the ninth fluorine is nearly 1 Å further. This is consistent with earlier investigations concluding that o-BiF$_3$ does not contain Bi in true ninefold coordination. We observed a similar behavior for the Bi in t-BiF$_3$. Figure 1 depicts the 11-fold coordination of lanthanum in the metal-centered polyhedron of LaF$_3$ in contrast with the reduced ninefold coordination of Bi in t-BiF$_3$. The calculated Bi–F bond lengths, displayed in Table I, show that nine fluoride atoms are situated 2.388–2.586 Å from Bi and that the two next-nearest fluorine atoms are 3.080 Å from Bi.

The cubic BiF$_3$ polymorphs, P43m and Fm3m, are essentially structurally and energetically equivalent to one another, but have a substantially higher energy than o-BiF$_3$ (1.06 eV/f.u. higher). Total energies were also calculated for the BiF$_3$ composition and the binary Li–Bi alloys known for this system. We also made extensive effort to search for ternary Li–Bi–F phases beyond the previously identified LiBiF$_3$ and Li$_2$BiF$_4$. Some potential structures were obtained by topotactic Li$^+$ insertion in o-BiF$_3$ (both octahedral and tetrahedral lithium coordinations in Li$_{0.25}$Bi$_2$F$_7$), through Li/Bi exchange in Li$_2$BiF$_4$, and spinel compositions containing Bi$^{2+}$. We applied a structure prediction algorithm to this system, which has been successfully applied to the prediction of binary structures and is now being extended to ternary structures. This structure predictor used a probabilistic structure correlation scheme to suggest possible candidate structures by correlation with other known systems. The search encompassed ternary structures in which the Bi oxidation state was between +3 and +5, yielding 122 probable Li–Bi–F phases at 16 compositions. The total energy was calculated for the top 53 of the 122 candidate structures although ultimately none of these were found to be stable in the Li–Bi–F ternary phase diagram.

The ternary Li–Bi–F ground-state phase diagram derived from these energy calculations is depicted in Fig. 2. The phase space of a ternary phase diagram at 0 K is divided into triangles, which indicate the coexistence of three phases. Compositions that are thermodynamically stable are denoted with a filled black circle, signifying that they exhibit an energy lower than any linear combination of other compounds that sum up to the same composition (and consequently they become part of the convex lowest energy hull). Compositions denoted by a cross are thermodynamically unstable as they exhibit an energy higher than that of the mixture of the stable phases composing that triangle. It is possible that a metastable formation of such compounds does take place if a stable phase cannot form due to slow-component diffusion or if nucleation is limited for certain compounds. Figure 2 also shows the equilibrium voltages with respect to lithium metal within each three-phase region.

Because the edge- and corner-sharing Bi–F polyhedra of o-BiF$_3$ were arranged in a manner that could reasonably accommodate either octahedral or tetrahedral coordination of Li$^+$, the topotactic insertion of o-BiF$_3$ was also explored even though substantial oxidation...
Even with exhaustive searching we found no new ternary compounds in the Li–Fe–F system, indicating that its experimental coverage may be rather complete. Unlike what was found in our study in early work regarding the electrochemical activity of BiF₃.⁹ Hence, any polarization reducing the voltage may lead to direct Bi and LiF formation, even in the very early part of discharge. Kinetically Bi and LiF formation is probably much easier than LiBiF₄ formation.

The Calculated Equilibrium Voltage Profile

The calculated voltage profiles for the reaction of o-BiF₃ with Li under thermodynamic equilibrium are presented in Fig. 3 for the formation of both bulk (squares) and nanoscale (circles) Bi. The initial conversion of BiF₃ to LiBiF₄ and Bi occurred at 3.38 V for Li under thermodynamic equilibrium, is also denoted within each three-phase region. The dashed arrows represent the equilibrium decomposition path for the lithiation of BiF₃.

Discussion

Even with exhaustive searching we found no new ternary compounds in the Li–Bi–F system, indicating that its experimental coverage may be rather complete. Unlike what was found in our study in early work regarding the electrochemical activity of BiF₃.⁹ Hence, any polarization reducing the voltage may lead to direct Bi and LiF formation, even in the very early part of discharge. Kinetically Bi and LiF formation is probably much easier than LiBiF₄ formation. Our calculated energies indicate that if LiBiF₄ were not noted in early work regarding the electrochemical activity of BiF₃.⁹ Whether LiBiF₄ forms as an intermediate when BiF₃ is lithiated is unclear. A significant topological relationship between BiF₃ and LiBiF₄ is not evident, and previous electrochemical investigations indicate that no reaction intermediates form.¹⁰¹¹ There are multiple reasons why LiBiF₄ may not form. For instance, the Li voltages calculated and shown in our phase diagram indicate that the driving force to form LiBiF₄ is small. It forms at 3.29 V from BiF₃, but is only stable down to 3.13 V before decomposing to Bi and LiF. Hence, any polarization reducing the voltage may lead to direct Bi and LiF formation, even in the very early part of discharge. Kinetically Bi and LiF formation is probably much easier than LiBiF₄ formation. Our calculated energies indicate that if LiBiF₄ were not to form, BiF₃ would decompose to LiF and nanoscale Bi at 3.17 V. Such a lower and flatter voltage is in better agreement with the experimental data shown in Fig. 3.

Given the large amount of polarization in the experimentally measured voltage curve, it is not straightforward to compare with our calculated curves in Fig. 3, although it does seem that the predicted voltage profile of BiF₃ is about −0.3 V higher in magnitude than the “equilibrated” voltage curve obtained during the current relaxation portion of the GITT experiment. The difference between the calculated and the experimental equilibrated voltage decreases to −0.2 V when accounting for the precipitation of very small particles by using the energy of a 1 nm Bi particle, a voltage decrease of 85 mV from that expected using the bulk energy as illustrated in Fig. 3 for o-BiF₃. The decrease in cohesive energy from the bulk metal to a 1 nm particle is significantly less for Bi than the change we observed with Fe. Bulk Bi displays only about one-half of the cohesive energy of bulk Fe to begin with.¹² Therefore we speculate that bulk metals with a small cohesive energy may cause a less dramatic voltage drop when precipitating as nanoscale particles during a conversion reaction. While the voltage curves that are experimentally obtained under applied current show some step-like features, the voltage obtained after relaxing the system is almost independent of the state of charge, indicating that it may be the voltage of unreacted BiF₃ in metastable equilibrium with LiF and Bi.
In a previous paper on conversion in the Li–Fe–F system, we advanced a theory for estimating the nonequilibrium reaction paths and voltages. The hypothesis was that metal diffusion (in or out of the host) is rate limiting. Applying the same ideas to this system would imply that upon discharge Bi is reduced to the lowest possible valence state in the fluoride host before it precipitates out. Upon reconversion (Li extraction) maximal oxidation of Bi in the host would occur. In the Li–Bi–F system these assumptions do not lead to a path that is very different from the equilibrium path. Given that Bi\(^{3+}\) is the lowest oxidation state that is observed in oxidized materials, this kinetic model would predict a direct conversion of BiF\(_3\) to Bi and LiF, which is indeed what is observed.

When considering reconversion from Bi and LiF, we can predict an analogous nonequilibrium effect on the reaction voltage because the reaction will attempt to form a structure with maximally oxidized Bi in a rapid manner. Reconversion to BiF\(_5\) is only possible if the reaction will attempt to form a structure with maximally oxidized Bi in the fluoride host before it precipitates out. Upon reconversion (Li extraction) maximal oxidation of Bi in the host would occur. In the Li–Bi–F system these assumptions do not lead to a path that is very different from the equilibrium path. Given that Bi\(^{3+}\) is the lowest oxidation state that is observed in oxidized materials, this kinetic model would predict a direct conversion of BiF\(_3\) to Bi and LiF, which is indeed what is observed.

When considering reconversion from Bi and LiF, we can predict an analogous nonequilibrium effect on the reaction voltage because the reaction will attempt to form a structure with maximally oxidized Bi in a rapid manner. Reconversion to BiF\(_3\) is only possible above 5–6 V, indicating that it is unlikely. Reconversion under nonequilibrium conditions from nanoscale Bi and LiF initiates from 3.13 V and quickly increases to 3.29 or 3.47 V if reconversion occurs above 5–6 V, indicating that it is unlikely. Reconversion under nonequilibrium conditions from nanoscale Bi and LiF initiates from 3.13 V and quickly increases to 3.29 or 3.47 V if reconversion occurs above 5–6 V, indicating that it is unlikely.

### Conclusions

The Li–Bi–F ternary phase diagram derived from first principles calculations confirms the stability of all previously identified ternary phases and does not identify any new phases. The voltage profile for the conversion reaction of BiF\(_3\) and Li to LiF and Bi, calculated from the ternary phase diagram, is in reasonable agreement with experiment. We report that the precipitation of nanoscale Bi lowers the conversion voltage by 85 mV due to loss of the cohesive energy of Bi. The formation of the reaction intermediate, LiBiF\(_4\), is unlikely during both discharge and charge because the driving force is very small.

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