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Gas Sensing Properties of Graphene-ZnGa₂O₄ Composites Prepared by Hydrothermal Method

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Abstract: A series of graphene-ZnGa₂O₄ composites (G-ZnGa₂O₄) were synthesized by a hydrothermal method. The prepared samples were characterized by XRD, SEM, TEM, Raman and XPS. The gas sensing properties of the G-ZnGa₂O₄ composites were investigated. The results indicate that the graphene content has a great influence on the response and the gas sensing selectivity; the optimal composition of G-ZnGa₂O₄ gas sensing composites is 0.1wt% G-ZnGa₂O₄. The sensor based on 0.1wt% G-ZnGa₂O₄ exhibits high response to 1000 μ L/L formaldehyde when operated at 203 °C and the response reaches 32.2; the detection limit for formaldehyde is as low as 1 μ L/L; the gas sensing selectivity to formaldehyde is also good and the ratio of $S_{1000 \ \mu$ L/L formaldehyde and $S_{1000 \ \mu$ L/L acetone reaches 26.8. The response time and recovery time for 1000 μ L/L formaldehyde are 6 and 5 s, respectively.

Key words: graphene; ZnGa₂O₄; formaldehyde; gas sensor

In the past several decades, many researchers showed great interest in semiconductor gas sensors for detecting gases in the environment, owing to the increasing release of harmful gases from industrial process and industrial products. It has been reported that the toxic air pollutants such as $CO^{[1]}$, $NO_x^{[2]}$, $NH_3^{[3,4]}$, $LPG^{[5]}$, $HCHO^{[6]}$, benzene^[7], toluene^[8], trimethyl-amine^[9,10] and acetone^[11, 12], might be detected using metal oxide gas sensors. Spinel complex oxides, including $ZnFe_2O_4^{[13-16]}$, $NiFe_2O_4^{[14, 17-19]}$, $CuGa_2O_4^{[20, 21]}$ and $ZnGa_2O_4^{[22, 23]}$, were widely reported as gas sensing materials. $ZnGa_2O_4$ nano-material prepared by high-energy ball milling method exhibited high responses to NO_2 at 240 °C and to LPG, ethanol, H_2 and CO at 340 °C.

Graphene could change the gas sensing response and gas sensing selectivity of metal oxides. The responses of SnO_2 /reduced graphene oxide (RGO) nanocomposites towards NO_2 and the optimal operating temperature were dependent on the ratio of $SnO_2/RGO^{[24, 25]}$. The sensor based on the nano-composite of a few layer graphene/ SnO_2 prepared by ultrasound-assisted synthesis showed high response to LPG at

room temperature and the operating temperature could be drastically decreased in contrast to pure SnO₂ sensor^[26]. Inclusion of graphene into ZnO greatly reduced the optimal operating temperature and increased the gas sensing response of graphene/ZnO composite to hydrogen^[27]. ZnO-RGO composites synthesized by a solvothermal method had preferential detection of C₂H₂, good selectivity, long-term stability and fast response/recovery time when operating at 250 °C^[28], which demonstrated that graphene addition would be effective in improving the C₂H₂ sensing performance of ZnO-based sensors. The response to ethanol of ZnO/graphene composite composed of cocoon-like ZnO nanoparticles and graphene sheets was nearly 5 times higher than that of pure ZnO^[29]; the sensor based on the In2O3-RGO nanocomposites exhibited excellent selectivity, high response, and relatively short response and recovery time for detection of NO2 at room temperature and the excellent sensing properties resulted from the composition and structure advantages of the In₂O₃-RGO nanocomposites^[30]. In comparison with pristine rGO sensor, the MoO₃-RGO chemiresistors have a clear response to hy-

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drogen sulfide down to 50 μ L/L at 70 °C^[31]. Graphene-TiO₂ nanocomposite layers prepared by using a sol-gel method along with spin coating deposition showed higher response toward sensing CO₂ compared with pristine TiO₂ sensors at optimum temperature^[32]. Even for the same kind of metal oxide/graphene composite materials, different preparation methods led to different microstructure, which resulted in different gas sensitivity, different optimal operating temperature and different gas sensing selectivity.

In this research, pure $ZnGa_2O_4$ nano-material and graphene/ $ZnGa_2O_4$ nano-composites were prepared and the gas sensing properties of the materials were also investigated. It was found that the sensor based on 0.1% G- $ZnGa_2O_4$ exhibited high response and gas sensing selectivity to formaldehyde when operated at 203 °C.

1 Experiment

All the chemicals used in these experiments were analytical pure reagents (Shanghai Chemical Reagent Company). The graphene was single-layer graphene (Suzhou Heng Qiu Graphene Technology Co., Ltd.).

Ga₂O₃ was added into the mixture solution of concentrated nitric acid and concentrated hydrochloric acid. Ga₂O₃ was dissolved after refluxing the mixture at 90 °C for 4 h. The graphene was dispersed in de-ionized water by sonicating for 30 min, Ga³⁺ solution and ZnSO₄ solution were added to the graphene suspension, and the mixed solution was stirred for 2 h; the molar ratio of n_{Zn} : n_{Ga} = 1:2, and the mass fraction (wt%) of graphene to ZnGa₂O₄ were 0.00, 0.05, 0.10, 0.25, 0.50 and 1.0 and the obtained corresponding samples were labeled as pure ZnGa₂O₄, S-1, S-2, S-3, S-4 and S-5, respectively. 2.0 mol/L NaOH was added to the above solution until the pH was 13.50. Then the mixture was transferred into a 50 mL autoclave and kept at 170 °C for 12 h. Finally, the product was washed with deionized water and ethanol for 6~8 times and dried at 80 °C for 12 h in an oven.

The crystallographic structure of the products was investigated by X-ray diffraction (XRD, Bruker D8 Advance, λ =0.154 056 nm, 40 kV, 40 mA, the scanning rate of 2°/min and the scanning range of 10°~80°). The morphologies and microstructure of the materials were observed by scanning electron microscopy (SEM, Hitachi S-4800; 10 kV) and transmission electron microscope (TEM, JEM 1200EX; 120 kV). Raman spectra analyses were performed with a Renishaw Invia spectrometer with a 532 nm wavelength laser in range of 3200~100 cm⁻¹. The specific surface areas and the pore size were obtained through N₂ adsorption-desorption isotherms (APAP2010MC). The chemical composition of surface was analyzed by X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS, ESCALAB250Xi) with all of the binding energy corrected by contaminant carbon (C 1s = 284.6 eV).

The method of sensor device fabrication and gas sensing property measurement were reported in our previous work^[33].

The response ($S=R_a/R_g$) of the sensor was defined as the ratio of the stable electrical resistance of the sensor in air (R_a) to that in the gas mixture of a targeted gas and air (R_g). The response time and recovery time were defined as the time taken by the sensor to achieve 90% value of the final signal^[34], respectively.

2 Results and Discussion

Fig.1 shows the XRD patterns of a series of G-ZnGa₂O₄ composites with different graphene contents. The main diffraction peaks in the XRD patterns of all samples were consistent with the standard XRD spectrum of ZnGa₂O₄ with the face-centered cubic crystal structure (JCPDS no. 38-1240); the diffraction peaks of Ga₂O₃ appeared in the XRD patterns when the contents of graphene were higher than 0.5 wt%; when Ga^{3+} solution and ZnSO₄ solution were added to the graphene suspension solution, the functional groups (such as -COOH and -OH) on G sheets captured the metal ions $(Zn^{2+} \text{ and } Ga^{3+})$ efficiently due to a strong electrostatic effect^[35], -OH and -COOH caused the nucleation and in-situ growth of Zn-Ga precursor [Zn(OH)₂ and Ga(OH)₃] on graphene substrate, and the resulting Zn-Ga precursor anchored on G substrate would form ZnGa₂O₄ in the process of hydrothermal reaction; The valence state of Ga³⁺ was higher than that of Zn²⁺, which led to more Ga^{3+} being adsorbed on the surface of graphene than Zn^{2+} , the excess Ga³⁺ on the surface of graphene formed Ga(OH)₃, Ga(OH)₃ decomposed into Ga₂O₃ and H₂O; the excess Zn^{2+} in the solution did not form ZnGa₂O₄ and existed in the form of ZnO₂²⁻ after the hydrothermal reaction stopped, and ZnO₂²⁻ ions were moved in the process of washing; with the increase of graphene content, the amounts of the excess Ga^{3+} on the surface of graphene and excessive Zn^{2+} in the solution increased, which could explain the reason that the diffraction peaks of Ga2O3 appeared in XRD patterns when the contents of graphene were higher than 0.5 wt%. Graphene had influenced the nucleation and in-situ growth of complex metal oxides, which was also reported in Ref.[36, 37]. The diffraction peaks of graphene could not be seen in the XRD patterns of the G-ZnGa2O4 composites, which resulted from the low diffraction intensity and shielding of the graphene peaks by those of $ZnGa_2O_4^{[38, 39]}$. The average crystal sizes calculated by Scherrer's formula of ZnGa₂O₄ crystals in G-ZnGa₂O₄ composites (pure ZnGa₂O₄, S-1, S-2, S-3, S-4 and S-5) were 5, 6, 6, 7, 5 and 6 nm, respectively.

Fig.2 shows SEM images of graphene, pure $ZnGa_2O_4$, S-2 and HRTEM image of S-2 samples. It could be clearly observed from Fig.2a that the graphene had a thin layer structure with a large number of folds on the surface; the particle sizes of pure $ZnGa_2O_4$ were in the range of 50~150 nm shown in Fig.2b, and the SEM results were in contradiction with the data of XRD , which implied that the big particles were composed of small crystallites; there were a lot of laminar sheets in S-2, the frameworks of the sheets were graphene sheets, and small $ZnGa_2O_4$ crystals were distributed uniformly on the two sides of graphene sheets; the HRTEM image of S-2 sample was shown in Fig.2d, the plane spacing of 0.289 and 0.253 nm could be ascribed to the lattice fringe of $ZnGa_2O_4$ crystal (220) and (311), respectively^[40-42].

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was adopted to characterize the composition and chemical state of the elements in G-ZnGa₂O₄ composite (S-1). As seen in Fig.3a, S-1 was composed of Zn, Ga, O and C obviously; The C1s peak in Fig.3b was asymmetrical and could be disassembled into three peaks located at 284.5, 285.2 and 288.9 eV, corresponding to graphitic carbon in graphene, carbon in C-O and carbon in O-C-O, respectively; the carbon atoms in different oxygen-containing functional groups might be originated from the residual oxygen-containing functional groups on graphene and the reconstructed oxygen-containing bonds between C atoms and the surface oxygen of ZnGa₂O₄^[43, 44], and this analysis on XPS peaks of C 1s proved that graphene existed in S-1. The peak of Ga3d was located at 20.0 eV, which accorded with the result reported in Ref.[45]. There were two peaks located at 1021.7 and 1044.7 eV which could be assigned to Zn 2p_{3/2} and Zn 2p_{1/2}, respectively^[35, 46]. A high-resolution peak of O 1s spectrum in Fig.3e could be resolved to two peaks with the energy of 530.43 eV for lattice oxygen and 531.33 eV for surface adsorbed oxygen species, and the surface absorbed oxygen species had an significant influence on the gas sensing properties of materials^[35]. Fig.3f displays the Raman spectra of S-2 and graphene. It could be observed that there were two sharp and strong absorption peaks at 1324 and 1593 cm⁻¹, which accorded with the characteristic peaks D and G of graphene, respectively. The peak D represented the edge defects of graphene which was related to the destruction of sp² hybridized carbon atoms and the formation of sp³ hybridized

carbon atoms; while the peak G correlated to the vibration of the sp² hybridized carbon atoms existing in the two-dimensional hexagonal lattice of graphene, G peak represented the E_{2g} vibrational mode of the sp² hybridized carbon atoms^[43]. The appearance of peak D and peak G in the Raman spectrum of S-2 sample indicated that graphene had been successfully doped into ZnGa₂O₄.

Fig.4 depicts the responses of pure $ZnGa_2O_4$ and G-ZnGa₂O₄ composites to 1000 µL/L formaldehyde at different operating temperatures. The responses of pure $ZnGa_2O_4$ to 1000 µL/L formaldehyde were very low, the maximum values appeared at 203 and 246 which were only 4.0; the responses of G-ZnGa₂O₄ composites reached maximum values when operating at 203 °C; the graphene content of G-ZnGa₂O₄ composites had a significant effect on the maximum gas re-





Fig.2 SEM images of graphene (a), pure ZnGa₂O₄ (b), S-2 (c), and the HRTEM image of S-2 (d)



Fig.3 XPS spectra of S-1 composite: (a) survey spectrum, (b, c, d, e) high-resolution spectra for C 1s, Ga 3d, Zn 2p, O 1s peaks, respectively, and (f) Raman spectra of S-2 and graphene

sponse of the materials; when the graphene content was lower than 0.1 wt%, the maximum response increased with the graphene content increasing; on the contrary, the maximum response decreased when the graphene content was higher than 0.1 wt%. The sensor based on S-2 (0.1 wt% G-ZnGa₂O₄ composite) exhibited high response to 1000 μ L/L formaldehyde, and the response was 32.2. The maximum response value could be obtained at a particular G/ZnGa₂O₄ ratio, and this phenomenon was also reported in literature [24]. Graphene was p-type semiconductor and ZnGa₂O₄ was n-type semiconductor; doping graphene resulted in formation of an n-p heterojunction at ZnGa₂O₄-graphene interface, which was propitious to gas sensing; the "shortcut" between graphene and graphene would increase if the graphene content increased, which was not advantageous to gas sensing^[24].

Fig.5 shows the response of sensor based on S-2 to six kinds of gases (1000 μ L/L) at different operating temperatures. It could be seen that S-2 exhibited high response and gas sensing selectivity to 1000 μ L/L formaldehyde when operating at 203 °C, and the responses were 32.2; while the responses to other kinds of gases were no higher than 2.5, and the ratio of $S_{1000 \ \mu$ L/L formaldehyde and $S_{1000 \ \mu$ L/L acetone reached 26.8. But when operating at room temperature, the sensor based on S-2 showed good gas sensing selectivity to ammonia, the re-



Fig.4 Responses of pure $ZnGa_2O_4$ and $G-ZnGa_2O_4$ composites to 1000 μ L/L formaldehyde at different operating temperatures



Fig.5 Response of sensor based on S-2 to six kinds of gases (1000 μ L/L) at different operating temperatures

sponse to 1000 μ L/L ammonia reached 14.4, and the responses to other kinds of gases were lower than 5.3. The formaldehyde sensing mechanism of metal oxides and graphene/metals oxide composites have been investigated by many researchers^[47, 48], The adsorbed oxygen on the surface of ZnGa₂O₄ captured the electrons from the conduction band of ZnGa₂O₄ in air, which resulted in the electrical resistance increase of ZnGa₂O₄ sensor device; when the sensor device was placed in formaldehyde atmosphere, HCHO molecules reacted with the adsorbed oxygen, the electrons captured by the adsorbed oxygen were released to the conduction band, which led to the electrical resistance decrease of the sensor device; the reaction occurred on the surface of ZnGa₂O₄ was following:

HCHO $_{(ads)} + 2O^{-}_{(ads)} \rightarrow CO_2 + H_2O + 2e^{-}$

Fig.6 shows the response/recovery characteristics of the S-2 sensor to different concentrations of HCHO when operating at 203 °C; the response/recovery times for 1000, 500, 250, 100, 50, 10 and 1 μ L/L HCHO were 16s/16.5s, 10s/4s, 5s/17s, 25s/11s, 9s /12s, 9s/20s and 5s/5s, respectively; the response



Fig.6 Response/recovery characteristics of the S-2 sensor to different concentrations of HCHO when operating at 203 °C

to 1 μ L/L was 1.2, which manifested that the detection limit for formaldehyde reached 1 μ L/L.

3 Conclusions

1) Graphene-ZnGa $_2O_4$ composites are synthesized by hydrothermal method.

2) The graphene content has a great influence on the response and the gas sensing selectivity, and the optimal composition of $G-ZnGa_2O_4$ gas sensing material is 0.1wt% $G-ZnGa_2O_4$.

3) The sensor based on 0.1wt% G-ZnGa₂O₄ exhibits high response to 1000 μ L/L formaldehyde when operated at 203 °C, the detection limit for formaldehyde is as low as 1 μ L/L; the gas sensing selectivity to formaldehyde is also good, and the ratio of $S_{1000 \ \mu$ L/L formaldehyde and $S_{1000 \ \mu$ L/L acetone reaches 26.8. The response time and recovery time for 1 μ L/L formaldehyde are 6 and 5 s, respectively.

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水热法制备石墨烯-镓酸锌复合物及其气敏性能

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摘 要:通过水热法制备了一系列的石墨烯-镓酸锌复合物。所制备的材料用 XRD, SEM, TEM, 拉曼和 XPS 进行表征。同时, 探究了 复合物的气敏性能。结果表明, 石墨烯的含量对复合材料的气敏响应值和选择性有着很大的影响, 并且当石墨烯的质量分数在 0.1%时, 复合材料的气敏性能最好。当操作温度在 203 ℃时, 0.1%石墨烯-镓酸锌复合材料对 1000 µL/L 的甲醛的响应值达 32.2 倍, 最低检测限 度为 1 µL/L。同时, 该材料的选择性也比较优越, 对 1000 µL/L 甲醛和 1000 µL/L 丙酮的响应值的比值为 26.8。该材料对 1000 µL/L 甲 醛的响应和恢复时间分别为 11 和 5 s, 对 1 µL/L 甲醛的响应和恢复时间分别为 6 和 5 s. 关键词: 石墨烯; 镓酸锌; 甲醛; 气体传感器

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