Mg–Ni–H films as selective coatings: Tunable reflectance by layered hydrogenation

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Unlike other switchable mirrors, Mg2NiH4 films show large changes in reflectance that yield very low reflectance (high absorbance) at different hydrogen contents, far before reaching the semiconducting state. The resulting reflectance patterns are of interference origin, due to a self-organized layered hydrogenation mechanism that starts at the substrate interface, and can therefore be tuned by varying the film thickness. This tunability, together with the high absorbance contrast observed between the solar and the thermal energies, strongly suggests the use of these films in smart coatings for solar applications. © 2004 American Institute of Physics.

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The discovery of the YH4 switchable mirrors by Huiberts et al.1 in 1996 has been followed by extensive studies on rare-earth hydride films. Upon absorbing hydrogen, a switchable mirror transforms from a shiny metal to a transparent semiconductor. The same behavior was later observed in Mg-alloyed rare-earth hydrides2 and Mg–Ni hydrides.3 However, at a low hydrogen concentration, the Mg–Ni hydrides also present a third intriguing “black” state with low reflectance and zero transmittance in the whole visible range,4 which immediately suggests their application as switchable smart coatings in, e.g., solar heat collectors.

Since this type of application generally involves absorption of the solar spectrum (at photon energies between 0.5 <E<4 eV) and/or emission of thermal radiation (at E <0.5 eV, for 100 °C),5 investigation of the switching behavior in the infrared is also essential. In this letter, we study the peculiar optical patterns observed in Mg2NiH4 films (y~2) during hydrogenation (0<x<4) in the infrared between 0.2<E<1 eV (1.2<λ<6.2 μm), with special attention to their applicability as selective tunable absorbers.

Films of Mg2Ni (1.4<y<2.4), with a thickness between 140 and 500 nm, are deposited on CaF2 substrates by magnetron sputtering from a Mg target with Ni additions. The background and Ar pressures are 10−5 Pa and 1 Pa, respectively. The films are covered with a thin (3−11 nm) Pd layer both to protect the films against oxidation and to catalyze the hydrogen uptake. Profilometry and Rutherford backscattering are used to measure the film thickness and composition. Optical measurements at near-normal incidence (~15°) are performed from the substrate side in situ during hydrogen loading and unloading in a Bruker IFS 66 Fourier transform infrared spectrometer. Simultaneously, the electrical resistivity of the film is recorded in a van der Pauw configuration.6 During loading, the hydrogen gas pressure is adjusted between 102 and 103 Pa, depending on the kinetics of the sample. For unloading, the films are exposed to air at temperatures between 30 and 120 °C.

Mg2Ni (y~2) films exhibit metallic behavior with resistivities, ρ, of about 50 μΩcm and high reflectance values that vary between 0.85 at 0.2 eV and 0.6 at 1 eV. As shown in Fig. 1 for 0.85 eV (λ=1.46 μm), already a small amount of H in the films (short loading times or low ρ) is enough to dramatically decrease the reflectance while the resistivity still shows clear metallic behavior. This highly absorbing state is the natural extension to infrared energies of the “black state” observed in Mg2NiH4 films in the whole solar range. A further increase of the hydrogen content produces alternating recovery and loss of reflectance and reveals that the highly absorbing states are not, or not only, related to a particular hydrogen composition. Finally, Mg2Ni is transformed into Mg2NiH4, which is a semiconductor7 with a band gap of about 1.6 eV,8 and the film becomes transparent, as indicated by the onset of the transmittance T in Fig. 1. In the fully loaded state, ρ is of the order of 10 mΩcm.9

Figure 2 shows contour plots of the reflectance R, as a function of photon energy, E, and resistivity (an indirect

\[ R(E, \rho) \]

\[ T(E, \rho) \]

\[ \rho(\text{mΩcm}) \]

\[ \text{loading time (min)} \]

FIG. 1. Reflectance (●), transmittance (○), and resistivity (―) as a function of hydrogen loading time of a 420 nm Mg1.80Ni film with a 3 nm Pd cap layer at E=0.85 eV (λ=1.46 μm). The reflectance is measured from the substrate side of the sample.

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measure of $x$, during loading, for films of various thick-
esses, $d$. For a specific $E$, the $R$ pattern as a function of $\rho$
produces a plot similar to that in Fig. 1. In Fig. 2(a), the
reflectance is also depicted during unloading, showing the
reversibility of the hydrogenation process. It is clearly ob-
erved that the reflectivity oscillations during loading (or un-
loading) evolve into the interference fringes of the fully
loaded transparent state, which already points to a common
origin for both of them. Since the measurements are per-
formed from the substrate side, the existence of interference
already in the first stages of the hydrogenation process, when
there is still no transmission through the film, can only be
explained by the formation of a well defined transparent
layer, presumably Mg$_2$NiH$_4$, at the substrate–film
interface. This layer, of thickness $f(x)<d$, grows during H
loading and finally reaches the total thickness of the film, $d$.

The two main features observed in Fig. 2, namely, the hyper-
boliclike bending of the minima and maxima as a function of
energy, and the increment of the number of reflectance
oscillations with increasing thickness, are consistent with
this model. This can be qualitatively understood from the
interference condition $2f(x)n=NX/N/E$, where $n$ and $N$
are the refraction index and interference order, respectively.
Quantitative evidence of this phenomenon has been obtained
by modeling the reflection and transmission of a three-layer
stack (Pd–Mg$_2$NiH$_{0.3}$–Mg$_2$NiH$_4$) at various hydrogenation
stages. It is worth noticing that the same self-organized
layered mechanism occurs during unloading in a completely
reversible way [see Fig. 2(a)].

The observed fringes lead to a switchable and highly
tunable reflectance, $R$, or absorptance, $A$ (during loading,
when there is no transmission through the film, $A=1-R$),
and strongly suggest the use of these films as smart coatings.
Figure 3 shows the reflectance as a function of photon energy
for different loading stages [A to E in Fig. 2(a)], in a film
with $d=475$ nm. The metallic reflectance of the unloaded
film (stage A), as high as 0.85 at 0.2 eV, is plotted in Fig.
3(a). With only a small amount of hydrogen added, at a com-
position of about Mg$_2$NiH$_{0.6}$ (the average H content depend-
ing on $d$), the film becomes black. The reflectance de-
creases drastically at $E>0.5$ eV ($\lambda<2.5$ µm), and varies
between 0.05 and 0.3 at 0.5 < $E < 4$ eV [see Fig. 3(b) and
Refs. 4 and 11], while it is still reflecting ($R>0.6$) in the
thermal range. By linearly extrapolating the reflectance of
Fig. 3(b) to low energies and convoluting $A=1-R$ with the
blackbody radiation at 100°C, one can estimate the thermal
emittance in this state to be about 0.16. Similarly, a solar
absorptance of about 0.84 is estimated by using the data at
$E>0.5$ eV in the Fig. 3(b) together with those obtained for
similar films at energies up to 4 eV.4,11 These high solar
absorptance and low thermal emittance are comparable to
those recently reported for films of a-Si:H/Ti on Al
substrates,12 proposed as good candidates for selective coat-
FIG. 3. Reflectance spectra for the 475 nm Mg$_{1.96}$Ni film shown in Fig. 2(a)
at different stages (A to E) of the H loading. The letters refer to those in Fig.
2(a). The solid circles in (c) correspond to the 250 nm Mg$_{1.70}$Ni film. The line
in (d) is the fit to the data with $n=3.7$ and $k=0.5$, both weakly depending
on energy in the studied range.

FIG. 2. (Color) Contour plots of reflectance vs photon energy and $\rho$ for (a)
475 nm Mg$_{1.96}$Ni, (b) 250 nm Mg$_{1.70}$Ni, and (c) 140 nm Mg$_{1.43}$Ni films.
ings in solar collectors. The main advantage of the Mg$_2$Ni films is that their behavior is switchable. Moreover, the small amount of H needed, which involves minimal morphology changes and thus little aging, makes the switching between A and B very attractive from the applications point of view. The self-organized nature of the absorbing double layer means that it is more easily incorporated as a single active layer in an electrochromic device.

Upon increasing the H content (stage C), a very different reflectance pattern is measured with a narrow highly absorbing state at $\sim0.4$ eV ($\lambda=3.1$ $\mu$m), whose energy and width can be tuned by varying the film thickness. Due to the layered loading mechanism, the reflectance spectrum at this state of the loading process is identical to that of a later loading stage in a thinner 250 nm film ($F$), as shown in Fig. 3(c). A larger H content in a thick enough film gives rise to more than one $R$ minima ($D$).

As shown above, a transparent Mg$_x$NiH$_y$ ($x=4$ for $y=2$) growing layer determines the reflectance spectra, even at the initial loading states. The spectrum in Fig. 3(d) shows the interference pattern observed when the whole film is transparent. The solid line in Fig. 3(d) is the result of fitting $R$ and $T$ ($T$ is not shown for clarity) to those of a Mg$_x$NiH$_y$ film with a Pd cap layer, both of known thickness and unknown $n$ and absorption coefficient, $k$.$^{11}$ The optical constants obtained for the transparent layer from the fits of the films under study are in between $2.5 \leq n \leq 4.0$ and $0.01 \leq k \leq 1.5$, depending on composition, in the investigated energy range. The lowest $k$ values are desirable since they produce the largest interference contrast. This can be observed by comparing the high contrast of the film in Fig. 1, with $k=0.03$ and the lower contrast of the film in Fig. 2(c) with $k=1$.

Nucleation of the transparent layer at the film–substrate interface is observed for all compositions under study, however the Mg/Ni ratio influences the growth of the transparent layer. In slightly Mg-rich films with $2.0 < y < 2.4$, only the first minimum and maximum are observed, in agreement with Isidorsson et al.$^4$ The contrast is also found to greatly decrease with the Mg content for $2.0 \leq y < 2.4$, pointing to the formation of a hydride layer with ill-defined interfaces. Whether the role of the Mg/Ni ratio is direct, e.g., due to the catalytic properties of Ni, or indirect, e.g., due to the low degree of crystallinity of the Ni-rich films$^{13}$ is not clear yet. Work is in progress to elucidate the catalytic properties of the substrate–film interface and the role of the Mg/Ni ratio during loading.

In summary, Mg$_x$NiH$_y$ films with $y \approx 2$ are particularly suitable as smart coatings due to their energy tunability, high reflectance contrast, and switching capabilities. While the metallic state reflects about 60% of the incoming solar radiation, a small amount of H is enough to change from reflective to black, absorbing 84% of the solar spectrum. As the film in this state emits only 16% of the 100°C blackbody radiation, it can be used as a switchable solar absorber in solar collectors. Such absorbers can be temperature controlled, which makes them also ideally suited for integration with photovoltaic cells.

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9. Measured values include the Pd cap layer. Therefore, measured $\rho$ and $T$ are lower than those of the Mg$_2$NiH$_4$ film itself.
13. Only films with Mg/Ni > 2 have shown x-ray diffraction peaks.