Stable Dye-Sensitized Solar Cell Electrolytes Based on Cobalt(II)/(III) Complexes of a Hexadentate Pyridyl Ligand**


Dye-sensitized solar cells (DSCs) can be fabricated from low-cost components with simple high-throughput printing techniques thereby providing a viable alternative to conventional photovoltaics.[1] A recent step-change in DSC research has been the successful application of transition-metal complexes (e.g., [Co(bpy)]⁶²⁺⁺, bpy = 2,2'-bipyridine), organometallics (e.g., ferrocene), and organic compounds as redox mediators,[2,3] replacing formerly used corrosive iodine/iodide derivatives. In a recent article about applying CoIII(tpy) complexes (tpy = 2,2':6,2'-terpyridine) as DSC redox mediators, Grätzel and co-workers highlight the importance of ligand substitution to achieve higher open-circuit photovoltages (VOC).[4] We recently reported a study of DSCs employing cobalt complexes based on a combination of a pentadentate ligand (2,6-bis(1,1-bis(2-pyridyl)ethyl)-2,2'-bipyridine, PY5Me₂) and a weakly bound monodentate ligand. We were able to fine-tune the redox potential of the complex by choosing monodentate ligands with varying Lewis basicity, thereby creating the opportunity to adjust the driving force for dye regeneration.[5] Here we report for the first time the application of the Co complex of a hexapyridyl ligand (6,6'-bis[1,1-di(pyrindin-2-yl)ethyl]-2,2'-bipyridine, bpyPY4) as a redox mediator in DSCs, and compare its photovoltaic performance and stability to the reference mediator [Co(bpy)]⁶²⁺⁺ (Co-bpy). A major motivation for using a hexadentate ligand was to develop a redox shuttle based on complexes with very high thermodynamic stability.

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Table 1: Metal ligand bond lengths in 1a and 1b.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>1a [Å]</th>
<th>1b [Å]</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co–N1</td>
<td>1.926(2)</td>
<td>1.929(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co–N2</td>
<td>1.941(4)</td>
<td>1.917(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co–N3</td>
<td>2.216(3)</td>
<td>1.952(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co–N4</td>
<td>1.965(4)</td>
<td>1.944(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co–N5</td>
<td>1.955(4)</td>
<td>1.940(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co–N6</td>
<td>2.233(3)</td>
<td>1.943(3)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Co–N bond lengths for cobaltous 1a and cobaltic 1b reveals that the major change upon oxidation of the CoII to the CoIII complex is a contraction along the N3–Co–N6 axis, with relatively minor changes to the equatorial bond lengths (Table 1). In contrast, all Co–N bond lengths in [Co(bpy)3]2+/3+ and [Co(PY5Me2)NMBI][2+/3+] changed significantly.10,11

The rigidity of the preorganized cavity of the hexadentate ligand appears to restrict structural changes upon reduction/oxidation to axial elongation/compression of the cobalt(II)/(III) coordination sphere (NMBI = N-methylbenzimidazole).

The cyclic voltammogram of 1a in MeCN (0.1 M NButPF6; Figure S3) shows reversible processes centered at −170 and −90 mV vs. Fe/Fe⁺ corresponding to the [Co(bpy)3]2+/3+ and [Co(bpyPY4)]2+/3+ redox reactions, respectively (Fe⁺ = ferrocene). Features observed at more negative potentials are ascribed to ligand-based reduction processes. Thus, the redox potential related to Co2+/3+ in 1a is calculated to be 465 mV versus the normal hydrogen electrode (NHE), whereas the corresponding redox potential for [Co(bpy)3]2+/3+ is 560 mV. The cathodic and anodic current responses associated with the Co-based redox processes are linearly proportional to the square root of the scan rate (ν), indicating diffusion-controlled behavior as is expected for a homogeneous system. A comparison of the redox potentials (vs. NHE) for 1a/1b, [Co(bpy)3]2+/3+, and the E(D/D⁺) levels of MK2 (Figure 2) reveals that 1a/1b will provide a substantial electrochemical driving force for dye regeneration (> 400 mV). The redox properties of 1a indicate that it is well suited for DSC electrolyte development using dyes with E(D/D⁺) energies ≥ 800 mV vs. NHE. In this study, MK2, a dye with a high molar extinction coefficient of 38,400 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹ and excellent light-harvesting properties was considered a good photosensitizer for use with one-electron-transfer redox couples.12

The 1a/1b-based electrolytes were optimized by varying the concentrations of 1a, 1b and the additives, NMBI and lithium bis(trifluoromethanesulfonyle)imide (LiTFSI). The data for the optimized devices are shown in Table 2. Previously, we have shown that very thin (1 μm) transparent titania films can be successfully used to harvest most of the incident light.18 However, in this study, we have successfully applied thicker titania films, consisting of 6 μm transparent layers of 30 nm particles coated with 4 μm thick scattering layers (400 nm particles). With these 10 μm mesostructured films, an efficiency of 7.8% for the MK2/Co-bpy electrolyte combination was achieved, which is higher than reported recently (7.3%).12d An impressive efficiency of 8.3% was achieved for the DSCs based on the new redox couple 1a/1b. A reduction in Voc of 100 mV is observed for 1a/1b-based...
Table 2: Photovoltaic performance of DSCs assembled with the two redox couples and MK2 dye with simulated sunlight (AM 1.5 G, 1000 W m⁻²).²⁴

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Redox couple[10]</th>
<th>1a/1b</th>
<th>Co-bpy</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(E_{\text{oc}}(\text{Co}^{III/II})) [mV]</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(V_{\text{oc}}) [mV]</td>
<td>757 ± 2</td>
<td>826 ± 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(J_{\text{sc}}) [mA cm⁻²]</td>
<td>14.7 ± 0.2</td>
<td>13.7 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FF</td>
<td>0.75 ± 0.02</td>
<td>0.69 ± 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\eta) [%]</td>
<td>8.3 ± 0.1</td>
<td>7.8 ± 0.2</td>
</tr>
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[a] Double-layer TiO₂ films [6 μm mesoporous TiO₂ (30 nm) and 4 μm scattering TiO₂ (400 nm)] and a Pt counter electrode were used for the fabrication of all DSCs. The devices were measured immediately after fabrication and the average performance of at least three devices with standard deviation is provided. [b] The electrolyte consists of 0.20 m \(\text{Co}^{II}\) complex, 0.10 m \(\text{LiTFSI}\) and 0.50 m of \(\text{NMBI}\) in pure acetonitrile (MeCN). [c] Redox potentials of the 1a and Co-bpy are reported vs NHE.

Figure 3: Current density (J)–potential (V) characteristics of the best-performing DSCs fabricated using electrolytes 1a/1b and Co-bpy. For photovoltaic performance data and details on the electrolyte composition see Table 2.

Figure 4: Electron lifetime (\(\tau\)) determined via IMVS spectroscopy versus extracted charge for DSCs based on electrolyte 1a/1b and Co-bpy. The electron density per volume of mesoporous TiO₂ film was determined by charge extraction experiments.

Table 2 presents photovoltaic performance data for DSCs assembled with the two redox couples and MK2 dye with simulated sunlight (AM 1.5 G, 1000 W m⁻²).²⁴ The devices, as compared to Co-bpy-based devices, are in agreement with the about 100 mV difference in the \(\text{Co}^{II/III}\) redox potentials of 1a and Co-bpy.

Figure 3 shows the current density (J)–potential (V) characteristics of the best-performing DSCs fabricated based on redox couples 1a/1b and Co-bpy, measured under simulated air mass (AM) and 1.5 G, 1000 W m⁻². The electrolyte included NMBI as an additive. The devices employing 1a/1b in the electrolyte show a higher current density (\(J_{\text{sc}}\)) and a significant increase in the fill factor (FF) compared to the devices based on Co-bpy, indicating that 1a/1b clearly outperforms Co-bpy as a redox mediator. This is likely due to the lower electrochemical driving force for dye regeneration in case of Co-bpy (\(\Delta E = 340 \text{ mV}\)) compared to 1a/1b (\(\Delta E = 435 \text{ mV}\)). This is in agreement with previous studies on DSCs employing cobalt mediators, where the minimum electrochemical driving force for quantitative dye regeneration was found to be around 500 mV.²⁴⁻²⁶ Furthermore, light soaking the devices made with 1a/1b for 20 min under AM 1.5 G and 1000 W m⁻² irradiation resulted in an increase in \(J_{\text{sc}}\) and a slight decrease in \(V_{\text{oc}}\), giving rise to an overall efficiency of 9.4% (see Table S2). Similar light-soaking effects have been previously linked to a shift in conduction band edge.²⁶ The incident photon-to-electron conversion efficiency (IPCE) spectra of DSCs, made using either electrolytes are comparable (see Figure S5) with a few percent higher IPCE for 1a/1b resulting in a slight increase in \(J_{\text{sc}}\).

Intensity-modulated photovoltage spectroscopy (IMVS), complemented by charge extraction measurements, was used to compare the electron lifetimes for DSCs assembled with 1a/1b and Co-bpy-based electrolytes as a function of the extracted charge (Figure 4). Interestingly, the two DSCs exhibit similar lifetimes for the electrons injected into the TiO₂ conduction band, indicating comparable charge-recombination rates for both electrolyte systems.

The evolution of DSC performance for devices based on 1a/1b and Co-bpy redox mediators was also tested under continuous simulated full sun irradiation. In this comparison, we also studied the effect of additives on device stability by using two different Lewis base additives. Keeping in mind that the Lewis bases added to the electrolytes may interact with the polypyridyl complexes, a comparatively milder Lewis base, p-trifluoromethylypyridine (TFMP), was examined as an electrolyte additive in parallel to NMBI, which is commonly applied in iodide/triiodide-based DSCs to improve the long-term stability.²⁶ In choosing TFMP, the excellent thermal, hydrolytic, and oxidative stability of fluorinated aromatic hydrocarbons and the relatively small size of the –CF₃ group, were considered beneficial features.²⁶ The J–V results for cells fabricated using 1a/1b and Co-bpy using TFMP as an additive are shown in Table S1 and Figure S5. The addition of TFMP to Co-bpy leads to a green precipitate and, as a consequence, the devices made with this electrolyte show poor performance reproducibility and very poor stability. In contrast, no precipitation was observed in the 1a/1b/NMBI electrolyte system.

Preliminary stability tests were then carried out to compare devices with NMBI and TFMP added to 1a/1b.
and Co-bpy-based electrolytes abbreviated 1a/1b/NMBI, 1a/1b/TFMP, Co-bpy/NMBI, and Co-bpy/TFMP (Figure 5).

A mixture of acetonitrile and valeronitrile (4:1) was used to reduce the volatility of the electrolyte. An environmental chamber equipped with a Hg lamp was automated to maintain the DSCs under continuous full sun irradiation at 45% humidity and a device temperature of 25–30°C to test the devices. Figure 5 shows the normalized efficiencies of the DSCs over a period of 100 h. DSCs based on electrolyte 1a/1b clearly outperformed those assembled with the reference mediator Co-bpy, showing a >20% performance increase over the first 24 h of continuous illumination. When TFMP was used, the DSCs based on 1a/1b initially showed a 20% increase in performance, which maintained across the full 100 h testing period. In the case of NMBI, the DSCs showed the same initial improvement in performance but there was a gradual decrease and stabilization at about 90% of the original value after 100 h testing. Over the 100 h period, a decrease in performance of over 80% was observed for DSCs based on the Co-bpy electrolyte and NMBI. In the presence of TFMP, this performance decrease was even more pronounced, with a drop of 76% observed after the first 24 h illumination period. In general, the Co-bpy electrolyte was found to be incompatible with TFMP, leading to a green precipitate and poor device performance.

In conclusion, we have prepared and structurally characterized the Co²⁺ and Co³⁺ complexes of a new hexadentate polypyridyl ligand and, for the first time, applied such types of complexes as redox mediators in DSC electrolytes. The devices constructed with these complexes were found to outperform the prototypical Co²⁺ redox mediator both in terms of overall efficiency and stability under full sun irradiation conditions. The design of multidentate ligands leading to very stable cobalt complexes under DSC test conditions is likely to become a major area of endeavor in the quest for high-performance cobalt-based DSC electrolytes that meet the stringent stability requirements of commercial applications. For further optimization of the cobalt-based redox mediators, studies are underway to evaluate the minimum electrochemical energy required for quantitative dye regeneration in line with our previous work on ferrocene derivatives.[16]

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