Plasmon-Induced Photoelectrochemistry at Metal Nanoparticles supported on Nanoporous TiO$_2$

Yang Tian and Tetsu Tatsuma

Institute of Industrial Science, The University of Tokyo, 4-6-1 Komaba, Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-8505, Japan

Metal nanoparticles, which show various colors based on size- and shape-dependent plasmon resonance, have a wide variety of applications. Plasmon-based photochemical and photothermal reactions have been used for the preparation of Ag nanoparticles and Au nanorods and irreversible and reversible photoimaging. Here we report the plasmon-induced photoelectrochemistry at gold and silver nanoparticles incorporated in a nanoporous TiO$_2$ film. One would employ the composite materials for the devices of which sensitive wavelength can be tuned or broadened by selecting appropriate nanoparticles. Cost of photovoltaic cells with expensive dyes will be reduced. Visible light-sensitive photocatalysts and simple surface plasmon resonance biosensors without photodiodes are additional potential applications. In the present work, the plasmon-induced photoelectrochemistry was studied for photoelectrochemical conversion of energy as well as information.

In a typical experiment, a Au-TiO$_2$ or Ag-TiO$_2$ film was prepared as follows: an ITO coated glass plate was coated with a nanoporous TiO$_2$ film prepared from an anatase TiO$_2$ sol (Ishihara Sango Kyusha, STS-21, 20 nm particle diameter) by spin-coating (sintered at 723 K for 1 h), Au or Ag nanoparticle suspended in ethanol (Au:101, 5-20 nm diameter, 20wt%-Au, 3wt%-protective polymer or Ag:102, 5-20 nm diameter, 30wt%-Ag, 2wt%-protective polymer, Nippon Paint) was diluted with ethanol (1 000-fold). The substrate was immersed in the suspension for 12-15 h and was rinsed. The resulting Au-TiO$_2$ exhibited an absorption band characteristic of the plasmon absorption of Au nanoparticles (542 nm), although it was red-shifted compared to that of the suspension (530 nm) due to high refractive index of TiO$_2$ (2.52).

The photopotential action spectra of TiO$_2$ and Au-TiO$_2$ films in N$_2$-saturated 0.05 M aqueous NaOH are shown in Fig. 1A. The substrate was irradiated with a visible light using a xenon lamp with an ultraviolet-cut filter and a bandpass filter (fwhm, 10 nm) from the back (1.36 x 10$^{13}$ photons cm$^{-2}$). No obvious change in the open-circuit potential was observed at the TiO$_2$ film because TiO$_2$ absorbs no visible light. In contrast, a significant negative potential shift was obtained at the Au-TiO$_2$ film under illumination. The photopotential action spectrum coincided very well with the absorption spectrum of the Au nanoparticles in the film. The maximum potential response (~140 mV) was obtained at around the absorption peak wavelength. In addition, the protective polymer absorbs no visible light. Thus, the photo-induced potential shifts were attributed to plasmon absorption of the Au nanoparticles.

Short-circuit photocurrents were also measured in the presence of I$_3$- redox couple. The incident photon to current conversion efficiency (IPCE, flux of collected electrons per flux of incident photons) was evaluated from the short-circuit photocurrent (Fig. 1B). A remarkable anodic current enhancement was observed at the Au-TiO$_2$ film under illumination and the photocurrent ceased as the light was turned off (inset of Fig. 1B). The photocurrent was reproducible and stable.

![Fig. 1](attachment:figure1.png)

**Fig. 1** Action spectra for changes in open-circuit potential (A) and IPCE (B) of the Au-TiO$_2$ film in N$_2$-saturated 0.05 M NaOH aqueous solution (containing 0.5 M KI and 50 mM iodine for (B)) in response to light irradiation (1.36 x 10$^{13}$ photons cm$^{-2}$). Absorption spectra of Au nanoparticles in the TiO$_2$ film are also depicted (solid curves). (B, inset) Photocurrent changes in response to switching of the illumination (540 nm).

A possible mechanism of the photoelectrochemical response is plasmon-induced charge separation. At the Au nanoparticle surface, collective oscillation of electrons is induced by incident light. In the Au-TiO$_2$ interfacial region, where bands of TiO$_2$ may bend in the space charge layer, the oscillating electrons may be influenced by the electric field of the layer. This should cause the transport of the electron(s) to TiO$_2$ bulk. Simultaneously, the Au nanoparticle, which is being charged positively, takes electron(s) from a coexisting donor, I$. In the present case, Au nanoparticles, similar to dyes, play a role as sensitizers.

Next, we studied the photocurrent of Ag nanoparticles confined in a TiO$_2$ film. Although the maximum potential change (~150 mV) was comparable to that for the Au-TiO$_2$ film, 4-fold enhancement in IPCE (4.1%) was observed. Although Ag nanoparticles are not necessarily stable in the presence of I$_3$- in general, the protective polymer of the metal nanoparticles might suppress the corrosion. Actually, the film exhibited the characteristic plasmon absorption peak even after 0.8 C of charges, which are required to dissolve almost all of the Ag nanoparticles, have passed through the cell.

Thus, it is of great importance to select more appropriate redox couples, not only for improving stability of the composite film, but also for increasing the photoelectrochemical conversion of energy. Then, we investigated the relationship among open-circuit photovoltage, anodic photocurrent, and the redox potential of various redox couples. The more positive redox potential, the higher photovoltage and anodic photocurrent were obtained. A strikingly high open-circuit photovoltage of 0.75 V, which is comparable with dye-sensitized solar cells, was obtained for the Au-TiO$_2$ when the most suitable redox couple was employed.