Insight into the viscosity enhancement ability of Ca(NO₃)₂ in molten nitrate salts

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Highlights
• Precise experimental results for viscosity of molten salts under high temperature.
• Analysis of molten salt structure under atomic scale.
• Find the inherent reason of viscosity enhancement ability of Ca(NO₃)₂.

1. Introduction
Molten salts are used as heat-transfer-fluid (HTF) in concentrating solar power (CSP) plant. Among various formulas of HTF, nitrate salts are the most common components for their relatively low melting point. The most commonly used HTF in solar thermal power plants is the binary mixture of NaNO₃ and KNO₃, known as Solar Salt. However, the relatively high melting point of Solar Salt results in high maintenance cost of the entire system. Thus, new molten salt formulas should be studied to obtain a molten salt mixture with low melting point. Ca(NO₃)₂ is one of the salts which can lower the melting point of Solar Salt. However, the addition of Ca(NO₃)₂ can cause a rise of viscosity of molten salt mixtures[1], which is detrimental to the heat exchange ability of molten salt.

Though it is known that the addition of Ca(NO₃)₂ can cause a rise of viscosity, the inherent reason of this phenomenon is still not clear. With the rapid development of computer science, molecular dynamics simulation method has become an important method to study materials from atomic scale. Corradini[2] and Wilding[3] have found network forming effect of trivalent metal halides and sodium carbonate, which may cause high viscosity.

In this work, the influence of Ca(NO₃)₂ on the viscosity of binary salts is studied through both experimental and molecular simulation methods. The inherent reason of viscosity enhancement ability of Ca(NO₃)₂ is studied through structure analyze from molecular dynamics simulation results.

2. Methods
Different amount of Ca(NO₃)₂ was added to Solar Salt and their viscosity were tested with a Anton Paar EC TWIST 502 viscometer, which can test viscosity at temperature up to 1000°C.

For molecular dynamics simulation, Buckingham potential was used as inter-molecular pair potential. Flexible nitrate iron model was used with intra-molecular potentials calculated from vibration spectrum. A reverse none-equilibrium molecular dynamics (r-NEMD) method was used to calculate the viscosity of molten salts. All the simulation was conducted using Lammps software package.

3. Results and discussion
Fig.1(a) shows the simulation and experimental results of viscosity. The difference between the two results is within 10%. Viscosities of different Ca(NO₃)₂ ratios are plotted in Fig.1(b). The viscosity decreases as the temperature increase, and increases as Ca(NO₃)₂ ratio increase. The viscosity increases remarkably as the Ca(NO₃)₂ ratios increase at lower temperature, while at higher temperature, the difference between the viscosities of different Ca(NO₃)₂ ratios becomes less obvious.
Cation-anion radio distribution function (RDF) of 10:1 ratio at 573K is plotted in Fig.2(a). The height of the first peak of K-N and Na-N pair is similar while for Ca-N, the height is remarkably higher. This denotes that Ca-NO₃ interaction is much stronger than that of K-NO₃ and Na-NO₃. The difference arises from the difference between the charge of Ca²⁺ and K⁺/Na⁺. For RDF curves with different Ca(NO₃)₂ ratio, the N-N pair charges most remarkably. A small shoulder can be observed at r≈3.5Å for the 10:1 mixture. As Ca(NO₃)₂ ratio increases, the shoulder becomes stronger while the first peak becomes lower. This can also be observed in the snapshots of the simulation box in Fig.2(c). The red chain in the snapshots are between pairs of N atoms separated by r ≤ 3.5Å. It can be observed that N-N network are formed in the mixture.

4. Conclusions
- Viscosities of the molten salts are measured and simulated and the results agree well. The addition of Ca(NO₃)₂ causes the viscosity increase.
- N-N network can be observed in the molten salt and as the Ca(NO₃)₂ ratio increases, the network grows as well.

References

Keywords
Molten salt; molecular dynamics simulation; viscosity