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(71) Applicant: SHELL INTERNATIONALE RESEARCH MAATSCHAPPIJ B.V. [NL/NL]; Carel van Bylandtlaan 30, NL-2596 HR The Hague (NL).

(72) Inventor: HAMILTON, David, Morris, Jr.; 1811 Rustic Hills Court, Sugar Land, TX 77479 (US).

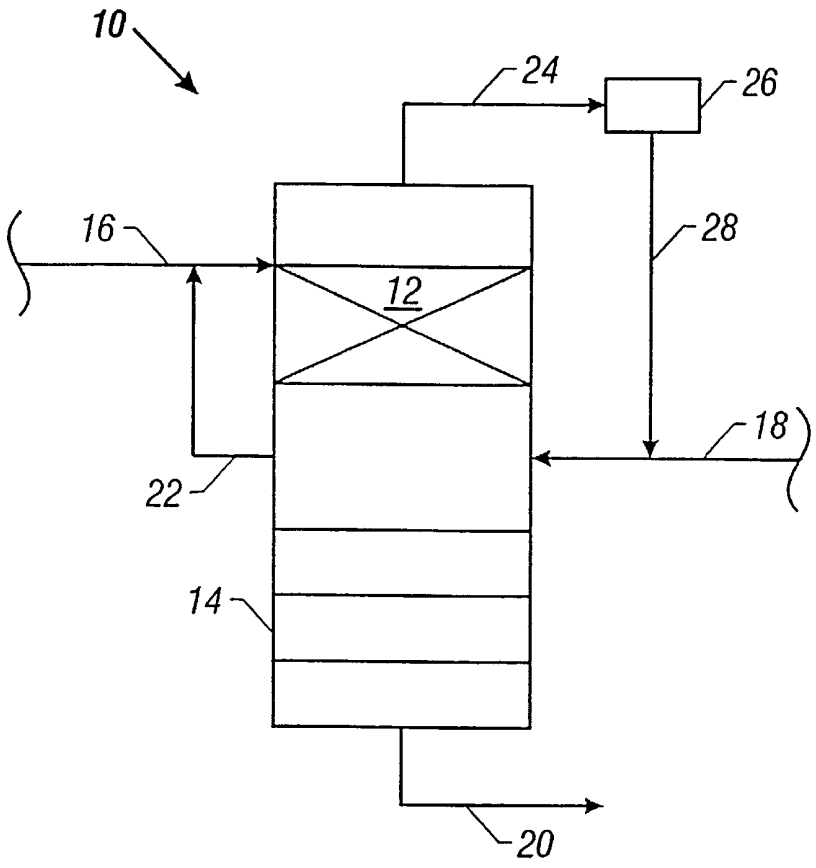
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(54) Title: PROCESS FOR CATALYTIC HYDROXYLATION OF AROMATIC COMPOUNDS



(57) Abstract: A process comprising the direct hydroxylation of an aromatic compound in the presence of a non-zeolite oxidation catalyst under catalytic distillation conditions. The process can be used to form phenol or phenol derivatives.

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For two-letter codes and other abbreviations, refer to the "Guidance Notes on Codes and Abbreviations" appearing at the beginning of each regular issue of the PCT Gazette.

PROCESS FOR CATALYTIC HYDROXYLATION OF AROMATIC COMPOUNDS

The present invention relates to a process for hydroxylation aromatic compounds using an oxidant over an oxidizing catalyst.

Various methods are known to produce hydroxylated aromatic compounds. The majority of such processes require either the purchase or the formation of an aromatic compound bearing a substituent besides a hydroxyl group. That pre-existing substituent then is converted to a hydroxyl group. Direct hydroxylation of aromatic compounds theoretically should be more economical.

Known methods for directly hydroxylating aromatics, particularly for directly converting benzene to phenol, are gas phase processes. In such processes, vapour of an aromatic compound is partially oxidized at high temperature, typically by reaction with nitrous oxide over a catalyst bed.

Gas phase direct conversion processes are less than ideal for a number of reasons. The energy required to supply the initial heat to begin the reaction is costly. In addition, the reaction of benzene and nitrous oxide is highly exothermic. Expensive, complex system designs may be required to handle the excess heat.

The expense of such reactions is further increased by coke formation from the decomposition products formed at such high temperatures. The average productivity of a catalyst for gas phase oxidation of benzene is only about 4 mmol phenol/g catalyst/hour. The coked catalyst must be regenerated at frequent intervals.

Finally, the reported selectivity of nitrous oxide to phenol in these gas phase processes is low. While selectivities of benzene to phenol of 97-98 mol% are reported, the reported selectivity of nitrous oxide to phenol is only about 85 mol%.

A more economical and efficient process is needed for directly oxidizing aromatic compounds.

The present invention provides a process comprising:

contacting an aromatic compound with a non-zeolite oxidation catalyst and an oxidant under conditions effective to hydroxylate said aromatic compound to produce a hydroxylated product and an un-hydroxylated product, while maintaining at least a portion of said aromatic compound in a liquid phase; and

separating said hydroxylated product from said un-hydroxylated product.

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of one embodiment of the present invention.

Preferably the process according to the present invention is carried out under catalytic distillation conditions, wherein a portion of the aromatic compound is maintained in a liquid phase. More preferably the process is carried out in a continuous manner. Preferably the conditions are such that the stability of the catalyst and the selectivity of the conversion of the oxidant to the hydroxylated product is maximized.

More particularly, the process of the invention is preferably a catalytic distillation process for the oxidative hydroxylation of aromatic compounds to form the respective hydroxylated derivative at a temperature and a pressure that maintains at least a portion of the aromatic compound in the liquid phase and manages the heat generated by the exothermic hydroxylation reaction. Reflux of the un-reacted aromatic compound can render the reaction substantially isothermic. Reduced operating

temperatures and heat management as practiced in the process of the invention maximize the catalyst life by reducing catalyst coking. The process thus provides for direct hydroxylation of an aromatic compound under conditions effective to prevent coke formation on the catalyst. The selectivity of the conversion of the oxidant to hydroxylated product also is increased to at least 90 mol%, preferably to at least 95 mol%, most preferably to at least 99 mol%.

During catalytic distillation, the hydroxylation reaction occurs simultaneously with the distillation, the hydroxylated product being removed from the catalytic zone as it is formed. Removal of the hydroxylated product minimizes side reactions and decomposition of the hydroxylated product.

The distillation column reactor, also called catalytic distillation reactor, preferably comprises a catalytic zone, also called a reaction zone, and a distillation zone. The "catalytic zone" is defined as the portion of the reactor containing the catalyst where the oxidant and aromatic compound react to form hydroxylated product. The "distillation zone," preferably a "fractionation zone," is defined as the portion of the reactor adapted to separate the hydroxylated product from the un-reacted aromatic compound. The distillation zone preferably is a conventional fractionation column design, preferably integral with and downstream of the reaction zone.

The catalytic zone is maintained at a temperature sufficient to hydroxylate the aromatic compound, preferably at a temperature within the range of from 50 °C, more preferably from above 100 °C to 400 °C, more preferably 270 °C.

The distillation zone of the reactor is maintained at a temperature and a pressure sufficient to maintain any

un-reacted aromatic compound that travels from the catalytic zone to the distillation zone in the vapour phase, preferably at or above the boiling point of the aromatic compound at a given pressure and below the boiling point of the hydroxylated product, at the given pressure. Thus, an effective separation of the hydroxylated product from the aromatic compound is achieved. The temperature in the distillation zone of the reactor is higher than the temperature in the catalytic zone of the reactor, creating a temperature gradient within the reactor of from 50 °C to 400 °C, preferably from 80 °C to 300 °C such that the lower boiling components are vaporized and migrate toward the upper portion of the reactor while the higher boiling components migrate toward the lower portion of the reactor. The un-reacted aromatic compound eventually reaches a point in the reactor where it boils, and as a result, the temperature of the reactor is controlled by the boiling point of the aromatic compound at the system pressure. The exothermic heat of the hydroxylation reaction will vaporize a portion of the un-reacted liquid aromatic compound but will not increase the temperature in the reactor. The hydroxylation reaction has an increased driving force because the hydroxylated product is removed and cannot contribute to a reverse reaction.

The pressure in the catalytic distillation column is preferably from 0.2 atm to 50 atm, more preferably from 0.5 atm to 30 atm.

Preferably the hydroxylation reaction is catalyzed by an oxidation catalyst in the presence of an oxidant in a catalytic distillation reactor at conditions that also allow for fractional distillation.

The hydroxylated product has a higher boiling point than the oxidant and the aromatic compound, and is separated from un-reacted aromatic compound in the

distillation zone of the reactor. The temperature along the reactor will vary depending upon the reactants and the products. The highest temperature will be in the bottom of the reactor, in the distillation zone, and the temperature along the column will be the boiling point of the composition at that point in the column under a given pressure. The reactor preferably is operated at a temperature and pressure effective to vaporize the aromatic compound as it approaches the distillation zone of the reactor while maintaining the hydroxlyated product in the liquid phase. The oxidant preferably remains in a gaseous state and un-reacted oxidant is withdrawn as overhead. The hydroxylated product is withdrawn from the distillation zone and any un-reacted aromatic compound may be allowed to reflux or it may be withdrawn from the distillation zone and added to the original aromatic compound feed as makeup.

In the catalytic distillation reactor both a liquid phase, or internal reflux, and a vapour phase can exist. The liquid phase is more dense than a gas phase and allows for a more dense concentration of molecules for reaction over the catalyst. The fractionation or distillation separates hydroxylated product from un-reacted materials, which makes it possible to have the benefits of a combined liquid phase and vapour phase system while avoiding continual contact between the catalyst, the reactants, and the products.

A number of possible catalytic distillation reactor configurations are useful with the present invention, including but not limited to an upflow reactor, a downflow reactor, and a horizontal flow reactor. The reactor contains a reaction or catalytic zone sized to accommodate a fixed catalyst and a distillation zone designed to separate the hydroxylated product from un-reacted materials. The distillation zone is integral with

the reaction or catalytic zones. Examples of suitable catalytic distillation reactors are found in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,476,978; 5,262,576; 5,176,883; 5,243,115; 5,321,181; 5,345,006; 5,215,725; 5,770,782; 5,446,223; and 5,190,904, which are hereby incorporated by reference.

Specific catalytic distillation column design and process conditions will vary depending upon the reactants used.

The temperature and pressure can be adjusted by one of ordinary skill in the art based on the properties of the reactants including the aromatic compound and the oxidant, to effectively hydroxylate the aromatic and to separate the hydroxylated product from the reactants based on their respective boiling points at a given pressure.

In a preferred embodiment, the catalytic zone and the distillation zone are in a single column. The catalytic zone contains an amount of catalyst and the distillation zone contains a number of conventional separation trays. The aromatic compound preferably is delivered to the column above the catalyst and the oxidant is fed to the column below the catalyst. Any un-reacted aromatic compound is either withdrawn from the column once it leaves the catalytic zone, preferably as a vapour, and supplied as makeup or allowed to reflux. The overhead is withdrawn from the column above the catalytic zone and typically will contain a mixture consisting mostly of oxidant and a small amount of aromatic compound. The oxidant preferably is separated from the aromatic compound by conventional means and recycled as makeup.

The non-zeolite catalyst is preferably a non-zeolite molecular sieve. Non-zeolite molecular sieves that can be used in the process according to the invention to catalyze the hydroxylation of aromatics include but are

not necessarily limited to microporous aluminium phosphates (AlPO's) or silica aluminium phosphates (SAPO's). Preferably the non-zeolite molecular sieves contain metals that are capable of being oxidized and reduced, such as, Co, V, Mn, Mg, and Fe. More preferably the non-zeolite catalyst comprises AlPO's or SAPO's with a fraction of the Al or phosphate ions being replaced during synthesis by a transition metal ion, from 0.001 wt.% to 0.6 wt.%, preferably 0.01 wt.% to 0.4 wt.%. Synthesis of Mn-containing AlPO has been shown to hydroxylate dodecene to dodecanol using air as the oxidant as described in Chem. Commun. 1999, pp. 1841-1842, which is incorporated by reference herein. Alternatively, the transition metal may be incorporated into the framework of the catalyst after synthesis of the catalyst using known means including but not necessarily limited to ion exchange, impregnation, co-mulling, and physical admixing. Additional examples of suitable non-zeolite molecular sieves and their methods of preparation can be found in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,683,217 and 4,758,419; European patent Nos. EP 0 043 562, EP 0 158 976; J. Phys. Chem. 1990, vol. 94, pp. 6425-6464, and pp. 6431-6435.

Another preferred non-zeolite catalyst for use in the present invention includes vanadium-peroxide complexes formed by using hydroquinones to produce peroxide species, which are transferred to the vanadium complexes. The vanadium-peroxide complexes can be used to hydroxylate aromatic compounds. A description of this method can be found in U.S. Patent 5,912,391, incorporated by reference herein.

Any suitable oxidant may be used. Examples of oxidizing gases include but are not necessarily limited to, nitrous oxide, oxygen, and air. A preferred oxidant is nitrous oxide. Regardless of the oxidant used, the molar ratio of oxidant to aromatic compound is from

1:100, preferably 1:10, most preferably 1:3, more preferably bout 1:1. In practice, the oxidant to aromatic compound ratio is the stoichiometric ratio that will yield the desired product.

Where the product desired is phenol, the preferred aromatic compound is benzene. Other hydroxylated aromatics may be produced using the current method, benzene derivatives suitable for such hydroxylation include but are not necessarily limited to phenol, fluorobenzene, chlorobenzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and similar compounds having an aromatic ring with a substitutable hydrogen atom on the ring.

The process hereinbelow is described with reference to benzene, but the process is not limited to benzene and may be used with any aromatic compound.

The benzene may be added at any point in the reactor, for example it may be added to the fixed bed catalyst or to the reflux as makeup. At least a portion of the benzene, preferably from 10% to 100%, is fed to the reactor in a liquid state. The oxidant preferably is a gas, and is fed to the reactor at a point below the catalyst bed allowing the oxidant to flow upward into the catalyst bed where the oxidant contacts and reacts with the benzene. Once in the reactor, the benzene contacts the catalyst and the oxidant, and the benzene is hydroxylated to form phenol. Phenol has a higher boiling point (182 °C.) than benzene (80 °C), which allows for easy separation by fractional distillation.

The overhead taken from the distillation column preferably is partially condensed to separate the un-reacted benzene from the un-reacted oxidant. The partially condensed overheads are preferably passed to an accumulator where benzene is collected and the gaseous oxidant is taken off. The benzene and the oxidant can be fed back to the distillation column.

Preferably, heat generated by the hydroxylation reaction is removed from the reactor by the reflux of the un-reacted organic compounds, allowing for isothermal operation of the system. Regulating the heat in the reactor also extends the catalyst life.

Fig. 1 illustrates one embodiment of the present invention for the production of phenol. A distillation column reactor 10 has a middle portion that contains a catalyst 12 and a lower portion of the reactor contains a conventional distillation column 14 with a sufficient number of trays to allow for the separation of the phenol product from any un-reacted benzene. The benzene is fed to the reactor through line 16 above the catalyst 12 and the oxidant gas is fed to reactor 10 through line 18 below the catalyst 12. The reaction is exothermic and is initiated by contacting the oxidant and the benzene in the presence of the catalyst. Phenol is the principal reaction product. Phenol has a higher boiling point than the benzene and the oxidant and is recovered from the column via line 20. The temperature below the catalyst bed is higher than the boiling point of benzene and lower than the boiling point of phenol to facilitate the separation of the benzene from the phenol. Un-reacted benzene can be withdrawn from the reactor 10 via line 22 and added as makeup to the benzene fed through line 16 into the reactor 10. Alternatively, the un-reacted benzene is allowed to reflux. The oxidant is withdrawn as overhead through line 24 and passed to a condenser 26 to separate any entrained benzene from the oxidant. The recovered oxidant may then be added as makeup via line 28 to the fresh oxidant feed.

Persons of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that many modifications may be made to the present invention without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. The embodiment described herein is

meant to be illustrative only and should not be taken as limiting the invention, which is defined in the following claims.

C L A I M S

1. A process comprising:

contacting an aromatic compound with a non-zeolite oxidation catalyst and an oxidant under conditions effective to hydroxylate said aromatic compound to produce a hydroxylated product and an un-hydroxylated product, while maintaining at least a portion of said aromatic compound in a liquid phase; and

separating said hydroxylated product from said un-hydroxylated product.

2. A process as claimed in claim 1, wherein said separating comprises fractional distillation.

3. A process as claimed in claim 1 or 2, wherein said oxidant is nitrous oxide.

4. A process as claimed in any one of claims 1-3, wherein selectivity for conversion of said oxidant to phenol is at least 90 mol%.

5. A process as claimed in any one of claims 1-4, wherein said non-zeolite catalyst is selected from the group consisting of microporous aluminium phosphate or silica aluminium phosphate containing a metal selected from the group consisting of Co, V, Mn, Mg, and Fe.

6. A process as claimed in anyone of claims 1-5, further comprising withdrawing said un-hydroxylated product as overhead.

7. A process comprising:

continuously contacting, in a distillation column reactor comprising a reaction zone and a distillation zone, an aromatic compound with a non-zeolite catalyst effective to hydroxylate said aromatic compound and an oxidant in a reaction zone at a temperature of from 50 °C to 400 °C to form a hydroxylated product and an un-

hydroxylated product, at least a portion of said aromatic compound being in a liquid phase; and

separating said hydroxylated product from said un-hydroxylated product.

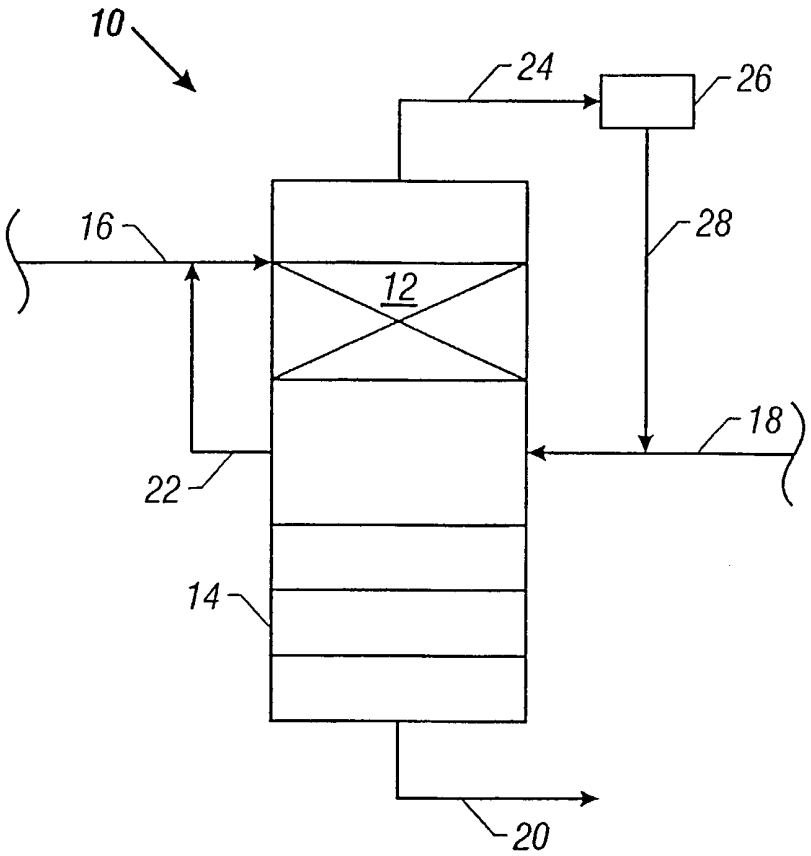


FIG. 1