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(54) **PREPARATION OF POLYOXYMETHYLENE
DIMETHYL ETHERS BY ACID-ACTIVATED
CATALYTIC CONVERSION OF METHANOL
WITH FORMALDEHYDE FORMED BY
DEHYDROGENATION OF METHANOL**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A particularly useful process which includes the steps of providing a feedstream comprising methanol, a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst and a source of formaldehyde formed by conversion of methanol in the presence of a catalyst comprising copper and zinc; and heating this feedstream with the heterogeneous acidic catalyst in a catalytic distillation column to convert methanol and formaldehyde present to methylal and higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers and to separate the methylal from the higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers is disclosed. Advantageously, methylal and higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers are formed and separated in a catalytic distillation column. By including within the column a section containing an anion exchange resin, an essentially acid-free product is obtained. Products can be used directly as a blending component, or fractionated, as by further distillation, to provide more suitable components for blending into fuel.

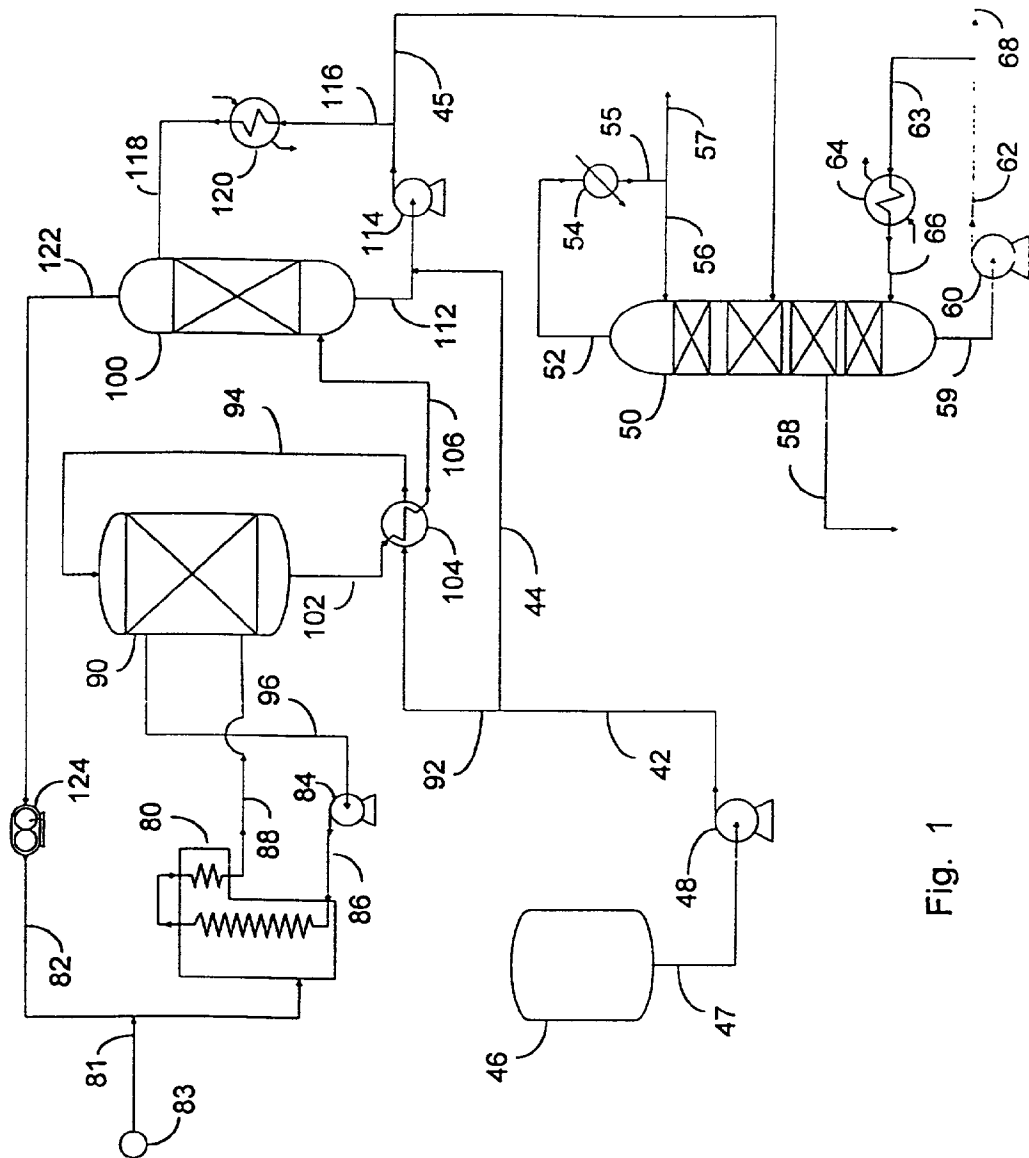


Fig. 1

**PREPARATION OF POLYOXYMETHYLENE
DIMETHYL ETHERS BY ACID-ACTIVATED
CATALYTIC CONVERSION OF METHANOL WITH
FORMALDEHYDE FORMED BY
DEHYDROGENATION OF METHANOL**

**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED
APPLICATION**

[0001] This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 09/190,312, filed Nov. 12, 1998, which application is specifically incorporated herein, in its entirety, by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present invention relates to production of organic compounds, particularly polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers, which are suitable components for blending into fuel having improved qualities for use in diesel engines. More specifically, it relates to providing a feedstream comprising methanol, formaldehyde and a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst, and heating this feedstream with the heterogeneous acidic catalyst in a catalytic distillation column to convert methanol and formaldehyde present to methylal and higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers and separate the methylal from the higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers. Advantageously, the catalytic distillation column has a section containing an anion exchange resin whereby an essentially acid-free product is obtained which can be used directly as a blending component, or fractionated, as by further distillation, to provide more suitable components for blending into diesel fuel.

[0003] This integrated process also provides its own source of formaldehyde which is an un-purified liquid stream derived from a mixture formed by dehydrogenation of methanol using a catalyst based on copper, zinc and a member selected from the group consisting of sulfur, selenium and tellurium as catalyst components.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0004] Conversion of low molecular weight alkanes such as methane to synthetic fuels or chemicals has received increasing attention because low molecular weight alkanes are generally available from secure and reliable sources. For example, natural gas wells and oil wells currently produce vast quantities of methane. Reported methods for converting low molecular weight alkanes to more easily transportable liquid fuels and chemical feedstocks can be conveniently categorized as direct oxidative routes and/or as indirect syngas routes. Direct oxidative routes convert lower alkanes to products such as methanol, gasoline, and relatively higher molecular weight alkanes. In contrast, indirect syngas routes typically involve production of synthesis gas as an intermediate product.

[0005] Routes are known for converting methane to dimethyl ether. For example, methane is steam reformed to produce synthesis gas. Thereafter, dimethyl ether and methanol can be manufactured simultaneously from the synthesis gas, as described in U.S. Pat. No. 4,341,069 issued to Bell et al. They recommend a dimethyl ether synthesis catalyst having copper, zinc, and chromium co-precipitated on a gamma-alumina base. Alternatively, methane is converted to

methanol, and dimethyl ether is subsequently manufactured from methanol by passing a mixed vapor containing methanol and water over an alumina catalyst, as described in an article by Hutchings in New Scientist (Jul. 3, 1986) 35.

[0006] Formaldehyde is a very important intermediate compound in the chemical industry. The extreme reactivity of the formaldehyde carbonyl group and the nature of the molecule as a basic building block has made formaldehyde an important feedstock for a wide variety of industrially important chemical compounds. Historically, formaldehyde has found its largest volume of application in the manufacture of phenol-formaldehyde resins, urea-formaldehyde resins and other polymers. Pure formaldehyde is quite uncommon since it polymerizes readily. It was usually obtained as an aqueous solution such as formalin, which contains only about 40 percent formaldehyde. However, more recently, formaldehyde is usually transported as an item of commerce in concentrations of 37 to 50 percent by weight. A solid source of formaldehyde called paraformaldehyde is also commercially available.

[0007] Because of the reactivity of formaldehyde, its handling and separation require special attention. It is a gas above -19° C. and is flammable or explosive in air at concentrations of about 7 to about 12 mol percent. Formaldehyde polymerizes with itself at temperatures below 100° C. and more rapidly when water vapor or impurities are present. Since formaldehyde is usually transported in aqueous solutions of 50 percent by weight or lower concentration, producers have tended to locate close to markets and to ship the methanol raw material, which has a smaller volume.

[0008] It is known that some reactions may be carried out by means of catalytic distillation. In catalytic distillation, reaction and separation are carried out simultaneously in a distillation column with internal and/or external stages of contact with catalyst.

[0009] In U.S. Pat. No. 4,215,011, Smith, Jr. discloses a method for the separation of an isoolefin, preferably having four to six carbon atoms, from streams containing mixtures thereof with the corresponding normal olefin, wherein the mixture is fed into a reaction-distillation column containing a fixed-bed, acidic cation exchange resin and contacted with the acidic cation exchange resin to react the isoolefin with itself to form a dimer and the dimer is separated from the normal olefin, the particulate catalytic material, i.e., the acidic cation exchange resin, being contained in a plurality of closed cloth pockets, which pockets are arranged and supported in the column by wire mesh.

[0010] In U.S. Pat. No. 4,443,559, Smith, Jr. discloses a catalytic distillation structure which comprises a catalyst component associated intimately with or surrounded by a resilient component, which component is comprised of at least 70 vol. percent open space for providing a matrix of substantially open space. Examples of such resilient component are open-mesh, knitted, stainless wire (demister wire or an expanded aluminum); open-mesh, knitted, polymeric filaments of nylon, Teflon, etc.; and highly-open structure foamed material (reticulated polyurethane).

[0011] In U.S. Pat. No. 5,113,015, David A. Palmer, K. D. Hansen and K. A. Fjare disclose a process for recovering acetic acid from methyl acetate wherein the methyl acetate is hydrolyzed to methanol and acetic acid via catalytic distillation.

[0012] In German Democratic Republic DD 245 868 A1 published May 20, 1987 in the text submitted by the applicant, preparation of methylal is carried out by reaction of methanol with trioxane, formalin or paraformaldehyde in the presence of a specific zeolite. Autoclave reactions of 1 to 8 hours are described using a zeolite of the "LZ40 type" with a ratio of silicon dioxide to alumina ratio of 78 at temperatures from 493 to 543 K. Methylal content of the product as high as 99.8 percent (without methanol) is reported for trioxane at 523 K for 3 hours. Reaction pressures did not exceed 5 MPa in the autoclave. Neither conversions nor selectivity are reported.

[0013] In U.S. Pat. No. 4,967,014, Junzo Masamoto, Junzo Ohtake and Mamoru Kawamura describe a process for formaldehyde production by reacting methanol with formaldehyde to form methylal, $\text{CH}_3\text{OCH}_2\text{OCH}_3$, and then oxidizing the resulting methylal to obtain formaldehyde. In the methylal formation step, a solution containing methanol, formaldehyde and water was brought into solid-liquid contact with a solid acid catalyst, and a methylal-rich component was recovered as a distillate. This process employs reactive distillation performed using a distillation column and multireaction units. The middle portion of the distillation column was furnished with stages from which the liquid components were withdrawn and pumped to the reactor units, which contained solid acid catalyst. The reactive solutions containing the resulting methylal were fed to the distillation column, where methylal was distilled as the overhead product.

[0014] Polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers are the best known members of the dialkyl ether polymers of formaldehyde. While diethyl and dipropyl polyoxymethylene ethers have been prepared, major attention has been given to the dimethyl ether polymers. Polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers make up a homologous series of polyoxymethylene glycol derivatives having the structure represented by use of the type formula indicated below:



[0015] Chemically, they are acetals closely related to methylal, $\text{CH}_3\text{OCH}_2\text{OCH}_3$, which may be regarded as the parent member of the group in which n of the type formula equals 1. They are synthesized by the action of methanol on aqueous formaldehyde or polyoxymethylene glycols in the presence of an acidic catalyst just as methylal is produced. On hydrolysis they are converted to formaldehyde and methanol. Like other acetals, they possess a high degree of chemical stability. They are not readily hydrolyzed under neutral or alkaline conditions, but are attacked by even relatively dilute acids. They are more stable than the polyoxymethylene diacetates.

[0016] Due to the relatively small differences in the physical properties (melting points, boiling points, and solubility) of adjacent members in this series, individual homologs are not readily separated. However, fractions having various average molecular weight values have been isolated. The normal boiling point temperature of a fraction having average n of 2 in the type formula is reported as 91° to 93° C. Boiling points at atmospheric pressure calculated from partial pressure equations range from 105.0° C. for n of 2, to 242.3° C. for n of 5. (Walker, Joseph Frederic, "Formaldehyde", Robert E Krieger Publishing Co., issued as No. 159 of American Chemical Society Monograph series (1975), pages 167-169)

[0017] Polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers are prepared in laboratory scale by heating polyoxymethylene glycols or paraformaldehyde with methanol in the presence of a trace of sulfuric or hydrochloric acid in a sealed tube for 15 hours at 150° C., or for a shorter time (12 hours) at 165° to 180° C. Considerable pressure is caused by decomposition reactions, which produce carbon oxides, and by formation of some dimethyl ether. The average molecular weight of the ether products increases with the ratio of paraformaldehyde or polyoxymethylene to methanol in the charge. A high polymer is obtained with a 6 to 1 ratio of formaldehyde (as polymer) to methanol. In these polymers, the n value of the type formula $\text{CH}_3\text{O}(\text{CH}_2\text{O})_n\text{CH}_3$ is greater than 100, generally in the range of 300 to 500. The products are purified by washing with sodium sulfite solution, which does not dissolve the true dimethyl ethers, and may then be fractionated by fractional crystallization from various solvents.

[0018] U.S. Pat. No. 2,449,469 in the names of W. F. Gresham and R. E. Brooks reported obtaining good yields of polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers containing 2 to 4 formaldehyde units per molecule. This procedure is carried out by heating methylal with paraformaldehyde or concentrated formaldehyde solutions in the presence of sulfuric acid.

[0019] In the past, various molecular sieve compositions, natural and synthetic, have been found to be useful for a number of hydrocarbon conversion reactions. Among these are alkylation, aromatization, dehydrogenation and isomerization. Among the sieves which have been used are Type A, X, Y and those of the MFI crystal structure as shown in "Atlas of Zeolite Structure Types," Second Revised Edition, 1987, published on behalf of the Structure Commission of the International Zeolite Associates and incorporated by reference herein. Representative of the last group are ZSM-5 and AMS borosilicate molecular sieves.

[0020] Prior art developments have resulted in the formation of many synthetic crystalline materials. Crystalline aluminosilicates are the most prevalent and, as described in the patent literature and in the published journals, are designated by letters or other convenient symbols. Exemplary of these materials are Zeolite A (Milton, in U.S. Pat. No. 2,882,243), Zeolite X (Milton, in U.S. Pat. No. 2,882,244), Zeolite Y (Breck, in U.S. Pat. No. 3,130,007), Zeolite ZSM-5 (Argauer, et al., in U.S. Pat. No. 3,702,886), Zeolite ZSM-11 (Chu, in U.S. Pat. No. 3,709,979), Zeolite ZSM-12 (Rosinski, et al., in U.S. Pat. No. 3,832,449), and others.

[0021] It is well known that internal combustion engines have revolutionized transportation following their invention during the last decades of the 19th century. While others, including Benz and Gottlieb Wilhelm Daimler, invented and developed engines using electric ignition of fuel such as gasoline, Rudolf C. K. Diesel invented and built the engine named for him which employs compression for autoignition of the fuel in order to utilize low-cost organic fuels. Development of improved diesel engines for use in automobiles has proceeded hand-in-hand with improvements in diesel fuel compositions, which today are typically derived from petroleum. Modern high performance diesel engines demand ever more advanced specification of fuel compositions, but cost remains an important consideration.

[0022] Even in newer, high performance diesel engines combustion of conventional fuel produces smoke in the exhaust. Oxygenated compounds and compounds contain-

ing few or no carbon-to-carbon chemical bonds, such as methanol and dimethyl ether, are known to reduce smoke and engine exhaust emissions. However, most such compounds have high vapor pressure and/or are nearly insoluble in diesel fuel, and they have poor ignition quality, as indicated by their cetane numbers. Furthermore, other methods of improving diesel fuels by chemical hydrogenation to reduce their sulfur and aromatics contents, also causes a reduction in fuel lubricity. Diesel fuels of low lubricity may cause excessive wear of fuel injectors and other moving parts which come in contact with the fuel under high pressures.

[0023] Recently, U.S. Pat. No. 5,746,785 in the names of David S. Moulton and David W. Naegeli reported blending a mixture of alkoxy-terminated poly-oxymethylenes, having a varied mixture of molecular weights, with diesel fuel to form an improved fuel for autoignition engines. Two mixtures were produced by reacting paraformaldehyde with (i) methanol or (ii) methylal in a closed system for up to 7 hours and at temperatures of 150° to 240° C. and pressures of 300 psi to 1,000 psi to form a product containing methoxy-terminated poly-oxymethylenes having a molecular weight of from about 80 to about 350 (polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers). More specifically, a 1.6 liter cylindrical reactor was loaded with a mixture of methanol and paraformaldehyde, in molar ratio of about 1 mole methanol to 3 moles paraformaldehyde, and in a second preparation, methylal (dimethoxymethane) and paraformaldehyde were combined in a molar ratio of about 1 mole methylal to about 5 moles paraformaldehyde. In the second procedure, a small amount of formic acid, about 0.1 percent by weight of the total reactants, was added as a catalyst. The same temperatures, pressures and reaction times are maintained as in the first. Disadvantages of these products include the presence of formic acid and thermal instability of methoxy-terminated poly-oxymethylenes under ambient pressure and acidic conditions.

[0024] There is, therefore, a present need for catalytic processes to prepare oxygenated organic compounds, particularly polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers, which do not have the above disadvantages. An improved process should be carried out advantageously in the liquid phase using a suitable condensation-promoting catalyst system, preferably a molecular sieve based catalyst which provides improved conversion and yield. Such an improved process which converts lower value compounds to higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers would be particularly advantageous. Dimethyl ether is, for example, less expensive to produce than methanol on a methanol equivalent basis, and its condensation to polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers does not produce water as a co-product.

[0025] The base diesel fuel, when blended with such mixtures in a volume ratio of from about 2 to about 5 parts diesel fuel to 1 part of the total mixture, is said to provide a higher quality fuel having significantly improved lubricity and reduced smoke formation without degradation of the cetane number or smoke formation characteristics as compared to the base diesel fuel.

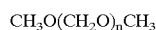
[0026] This invention is directed to overcoming the problems set forth above in order to provide Diesel fuel having improved qualities. It is desirable to have a method of producing a high quality diesel fuel that has better fuel

lubricity than conventional low-sulfur, low-aromatics diesel fuels, yet has comparable ignition quality and smoke generation characteristics. It is also desirable to have a method of producing such fuel which contains an additional blended component that is soluble in diesel fuel and has no carbon-to-carbon bonds. Furthermore, it is desirable to have such a fuel wherein the concentration of gums and other undesirable products is reduced.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0027] Economical processes are disclosed for production of a mixture of oxygenated organic compounds which are suitable components for blending into fuel having improved qualities for use in compression ignition internal combustion engines (diesel engines).

[0028] According to the present invention, there is now provided a continuous process for catalytic production of oxygenated organic compounds, particularly polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers. More specifically, continuous processes of this invention comprise (i) providing a feedstream comprising methanol, a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst, and a source of formaldehyde formed by the conversion of methanol in the presence of a catalyst comprising copper and zinc as catalyst components which source of formaldehyde comprises from about 30 to about 85 percent by weight formaldehyde in methanol solution containing less than about 5 percent water; (ii) heating the feedstream with the heterogeneous acidic catalyst under conditions of reaction sufficient to form an effluent of condensation comprising water, methanol, methylal and one or more polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers which methylal and polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers have structures represented by the formula



[0029] where n is a number from 1 to about 10; and (iii) contacting at least a liquid portion of the effluent with an anion exchange resin to form an essentially acid-free mixture comprising methylal and polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers having values of n greater than 1.

[0030] Suitable soluble condensation promoting components capable of activating the heterogeneous acidic catalyst comprises at least one member of the group consisting of low boiling, monobasic organic acids, preferable the group consists of formic acid and acetic acid. More preferable soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating the heterogeneous acidic catalyst comprises at least formic acid.

[0031] Preferably, the heating of the feedstream with the acidic catalyst is carried out at in at least one catalytic distillation column having internal and/or external stages of contact with the acidic catalyst and internal zones to separate methylal from higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers. In a preferred embodiment of the invention at least a liquid portion of the effluent containing polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers is contacted with an anion exchange resin disposed within a section of the distillation column below the stages of contact with the acidic catalyst to form an essentially acid-free mixture. Advantageously, the essentially acid-free mixture of polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers is fractionated within a section of the distillation column below the stages of contact with the acidic catalyst

to provide an aqueous side-stream which is withdrawn from the distillation column, and an essentially water-free mixture of polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers having values of n greater than 1 which mixture is withdrawn from the distillation column near its bottom. A source of methanol can be admixed with the feedstream, and/or into the stages of contact with the acidic catalyst.

[0032] Suitable acidic catalysts include at least one member of the group consisting of bentonites, montmorillonites, cation-exchange resins, and sulfonated fluoroalkylene resin derivatives, preferably comprises a sulfonated tetrafluoroethylene resin derivative. A preferred class of acidic catalysts comprises at least one cation-exchange resin of the group consisting of styrene-divinylbenzene copolymers, acrylic acid-divinylbenzene copolymers, and methacrylic acid-divinylbenzene copolymers. Preferably, the heating of the bottom stream with the acidic catalyst employs at least one distillation column with internal and/or external stages of contact with the acidic catalyst.

[0033] Another aspect this invention is an integrated process which further comprises formation of the feedstream by a process comprising continuously contacting methanol in the vapor phase with a catalytically effective amount of a catalyst consisting of copper, zinc and a member selected from the group consisting of sulfur, selenium and tellurium as catalyst components at elevated temperatures to form a gaseous dehydrogenation mixture comprising formaldehyde, methanol, dihydrogen and carbon monoxide; cooling the gaseous dehydrogenation mixture to predominantly condense methanol, and collecting formaldehyde therein; and separating the resulting liquid source of formaldehyde from a mixture comprising dihydrogen and carbon monoxide.

[0034] Preferably the resulting liquid source of formaldehyde contains about 30 to about 85 percent by weight formaldehyde in methanol solution containing less than 5 percent water, and is recovered by using at least one continuous absorber with cooling to temperatures in a range downward from about 100° C. to 25° C.

[0035] For a more complete understanding of the present invention, reference should now be made to the embodiments illustrated in greater detail in the accompanying drawing and described below by way of examples of the invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

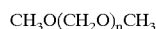
[0036] FIG. 1 is a schematic flow diagram depicting a preferred aspect of the present invention for continuous catalytic production of polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers by chemical conversion of methanol and formaldehyde in which a feedstream comprising a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst is heated with the heterogeneous acidic catalyst in a catalytic distillation column with internal stages of contact. A liquid portion of the effluent of condensation, containing polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers, is contacted with an anion exchange resin disposed within a section of the distillation column below the stages of contact with the acidic catalyst to form an essentially acid-free mixture, and fractionated to provide suitable components for blending into diesel fuel. The feedstream in the integrated process depicted in FIG. 1 is a stream of formaldehyde in methanol derived from dehydrogenation of methanol.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

[0037] The improved processes of the present invention employ a feedstream comprising methanol, formaldehyde and a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst. Suitable components include any acidic compound soluble in the feedstream, preferably an organic compound soluble in a feedstream of about 30 to about 85 percent by weight formaldehyde in methanol solution containing less than 5 percent water.

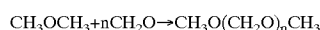
[0038] A preferred class of condensation promoting components capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst includes members of the group consisting of low boiling, monobasic organic acids, more preferably acetic acid or formic acid.

[0039] In general, after the feedstream is heated with the heterogeneous catalyst it will contain a mixture of organic oxygenates at least one of which is of higher molecular weight than the starting formaldehyde and methanol. For example, effluent mixtures can comprise water, methanol, formaldehyde, methylal and other polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers having a structure represented by the type formula

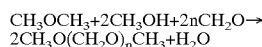


[0040] in which formula n is a number ranging between 1 and about 15, preferably between 1 and about 10. More preferably the mixture contains a plurality of polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers having values of n are in a range from 2 to about 7. Conditions of reaction include temperatures in a range from about 50° to about 300° C., preferably in a range from about 150° to about 250° C.

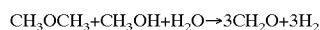
[0041] Stoichiometry of this condensation may be expressed by the following equations;



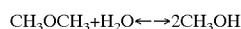
[0042] which may be combined as in the following equation when n is equal to m ;



[0043] As shown above, the synthesis of methylal and higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers from dimethyl ether, methanol, and formaldehyde is a reversible reaction that yields water as a co-product. Under certain conditions at least a portion of the water may be consumed in a dehydrogenation reaction expressed by the following equations;



[0044] and



[0045] Sources of dimethyl ether useful herein are predominantly dimethyl ether, preferably at least about 80 percent dimethyl ether by weight, and more preferably about 90 percent dimethyl ether by weight. Suitable dimethyl ether sources may contain other oxygen containing compounds such as alkanol and/or water, preferably not more than about 20 percent methanol and/or water by weight, and more preferably not more than about 15 percent methanol and/or water by weight.

[0046] According to the present invention, the ratio of formaldehyde to methanol in the feedstreams is any mole ratio which results in the production of the desired oxygenated organic compound. The ratio of formaldehyde to methanol is preferably between about 10:1 and about 1:10 moles. The ratio of formaldehyde to methanol is preferably between about 5:1 and about 1:5 moles. More preferably, the ratio of formaldehyde to methanol is between about 2:1 and about 1:2 moles.

[0047] The feedstream comprising methanol, formaldehyde and a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst is heated in a catalytic distillation column with an acidic catalyst, which is heterogeneous to the feedstream, under conditions of reaction sufficient to convert formaldehyde and methanol present to methylal and higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers. Examples of the solid acidic catalyst for use in the present invention include cation exchange resins, sulfonated fluoroalkylene resin derivatives, and crystalline aluminosilicates.

[0048] Cation exchange resins that can be used in the present invention may be carboxylated or sulfonated derivatives, but sulfonated derivatives are preferred because of the high reaction yield that can be attained. Ion exchange resins that can be used may be gel-type cation exchange resins or macroporous (macroreticular) cation-exchange resins, but the latter as exemplified by Amberlite 200C. of Organo Co., Ltd. and Lewalit SP112 of Bayer A.G. are preferred because of the high reaction yield that can be attained. Specific examples of useful ion exchange resins include a styrene-divinylbenzene copolymer, an acrylic acid-divinylbenzene copolymer, a methacrylic acid-divinylbenzene copolymer, etc.

[0049] A sulfonated tetrafluoroethylene resin derivative (trade name, Nafion H) is preferably used as a sulfonated fluoroalkylene resin derivative.

[0050] The most desirable of these solid acidic catalysts are macroreticular cation exchange resins having sulfonate groups.

[0051] According to the present invention, the ratio of formaldehyde to dimethyl ether in the feedstreams is any mole ratio which results in the production of the desired oxygenated organic compound. The ratio of formaldehyde to dimethyl ether is preferably between about 10:1 and about 1:10 moles. The ratio of formaldehyde to dimethyl ether is preferably between about 5:1 and about 1:5 moles. More preferably, the ratio of formaldehyde to dimethyl ether is between about 2:1 and about 1:2 moles.

[0052] According to an integrated process of the invention a source of formaldehyde is formed by subjecting methanol in the vapor phase to dehydrogenation in the presence of a catalytically effective amount of a catalyst preferably containing copper and zinc as well as tellurium and/or selenium and/or sulfur, if appropriate in the form of the oxides. Oxide catalysts which can contain copper, zinc and tellurium, are particularly useful. One class of preferred catalysts comprises copper, zinc and selenium or tellurium as catalyst components in an atomic ratios of 1:0.01-0.5:0.005-0.5, preferably 1:0.05-0.5:0.01-0.4, with the proviso that the amount of zinc is at least equal to the amount of selenium or tellurium present.

[0053] Preparations of suitable catalysts for dehydrogenation of methanol according to the invention are described in, for example, U.S. Pat. Nos. 4,014,939, 4,054,609, and 4,354,045 which patents are specifically incorporated herein in their entirety by reference.

[0054] The catalyst used in the present invention may be prepared by any one of conventional procedures known to those skilled in the art, for example, precipitation method, thermal decomposition method, or deposition and drying method. Any of these procedures may be properly selected based on the raw material to be used.

[0055] Suitable raw materials for catalyst useful in the present invention include a copper salt of a mineral acid such as copper nitrate, copper chloride, copper sulfate, copper sulfite, copper hydroxide, copper oxide, basic copper carbonate, metallic copper, and the like as a source of copper; a zinc salt of a mineral acid such as zinc nitrate, zinc chloride, zinc sulfate, zinc sulfite, zinc hydroxide, zinc oxide, metallic zinc and the like as a source of zinc; and selenic acid, selenious acid, selenium oxide, or metallic selenium and the like as a source of selenium. Further, zinc selenide, zinc selenate, zinc selenite, and the like may be used as a source of both zinc and selenium, and copper selenide may be used as a source of both copper and selenium.

[0056] Such catalysts can be prepared, for example, by kneading copper oxide with zinc oxide and tellurium dioxide (and/or selenium dioxide and/or ammonium sulfate) in the presence of water, drying the mixture at 130° C. and then pressing it to form pills, with or without admixture of a carrier. Suitable raw materials may be formed to a particle having a desired shape which may be tablet, sphere or the like and the average diameter of the particles thus formed should be more than 1 mm, preferably 2 to 5 mm. Catalyst particles are then reduced in a reductive atmosphere, for example, in two steps, first at a temperature of 100° to 300° C., preferably 150° to 250° C. for more than 0.2 hour, preferably 0.5 to 1 hour and then at the temperature of 500° to 750° C., preferably 600° to 700° C. for more than 0.1 hour, preferably 0.5 to 1 hour.

[0057] In the oxide catalyst of the type mentioned, the copper oxide is completely or partially reduced to metallic copper, during use, by the hydrogen formed on dehydrogenation of methanol. In some cases it is advantageous to reduce the catalyst prior to use, for example with gaseous hydrogen at 200° to 600° C.

[0058] The process may be carried out with the catalysts in the form of a fixed bed in the reaction vessel, for example a tubular reactor. However, a fluidized bed can also be used.

[0059] In the present method, methanol may be used alone, or methanol and dimethyl ether can be used in admixture with each other to produce formaldehyde.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

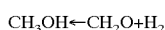
[0060] In order to better communicate the present invention, still another preferred aspect of the invention is depicted schematically in FIG. 1. In integrated processes of this invention a feedstream comprising methanol, formaldehyde and a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst is

provided by contacting methanol in the vapor phase with a catalytically effective amount of a catalyst consisting of copper, zinc and a member selected from the group consisting of sulfur, selenium and tellurium as catalyst components at elevated temperatures to form a gaseous dehydrogenation mixture comprising formaldehyde, formic acid, dimethyl ether, dihydrogen and carbon monoxide; cooling the gaseous dehydrogenation mixture with liquid and collecting formaldehyde and formic acid therein; and separating the resulting liquid source of formaldehyde from a gaseous mixture comprising dihydrogen and carbon monoxide.

[0061] In the feedstream preparation aspect of the invention which is described herein below, gaseous methanol is dehydrogenated in the presence of catalytically effective amount of a catalyst consisting of copper, zinc and tellurium or selenium as catalyst components. Referring now to **FIG. 1**, a mixture containing methanol in substantially liquid form is unloaded, for example from a road tanker (not shown), into methanol storage vessel **46** which supplies charge pump **48** through conduit **47**. Charge pump **48** transfers the liquid methanol through conduit **42** and conduit **92** which is in flow communication with heat exchanger **104** and formaldehyde reactor **90** through conduit **94**.

[0062] Formaldehyde reactor **90** contains particulate dehydrogenation catalyst disposed in a plurality of tubes of a vertical heat exchanger which is maintained at temperatures from about 500° to 750° C. by circulation of heating fluid to the shell side of formaldehyde reactor **90** through conduit **88** from furnace **80**. Heating fluid is returned to furnace **80** through conduits **96** and **86** by means of pump **84**. Natural gas or other suitable fuel is supplied to furnace fuel manifold **82** through conduit **81** from a suitable fuel source **83**. As described below, at least a portion of the co-product hydrogen is used as fuel for combustion with air in furnace **80**.

[0063] In this embodiment of the invention, CuZnTeO or CuZnSeO catalyzes the conversion of methanol to formaldehyde by a reversible dehydrogenation reaction at temperatures in a range from about 500° to 750°, preferably in a range from about 600° to 700° C.:



[0064] Preferably the catalyst components copper, zinc and selenium or tellurium as catalyst components are used in an atomic ratios of 1:0.05-0.5:0.01-0.5 with the proviso that the amount zinc is at least equal to the amount of selenium or tellurium, and more preferably ratios of 1:0.05-0.5:0.05-0.4.

[0065] Gaseous effluent from formaldehyde reactor **90** is transferred through conduit **102**, cooled against the reactor feedstream in exchanger **104** and then passed through conduit **106** into a separation tower **100** where formaldehyde and methanol are separated from a mixture of gaseous co-products including hydrogen, methane, and oxides of carbon. Separation tower **100** contains a high efficiency packing or other means for contacting counter-currently the gaseous stream with an liquid. Liquid from the bottom of separation tower **100** is circulated in a pump-around on the tower through conduits **112** and **116**, cooler **120**, and conduit **118** by means of pump **114**. Methanol is diverted from conduit **42**, through conduit **44** to supply pump **114**. Overhead temperatures in separation tower **100** are in a range of

about 15° to about 55° C., preferably about 30° to about 40° C. A gaseous overhead stream including hydrogen, methane, and oxides of carbon is transferred through conduit **122** and into furnace fuel manifold **82** by means of blower **124**. Preferably the elevated temperatures are maintained in a range from about 600° to about 700° C. using a source of heat derived at least in part from this gaseous mixture, comprising dihydrogen and carbon monoxide, by combustion thereof. As needed additional fuel such as natural gas is supplied to manifold **82** through conduit **81** from a suitable fuel source **83**.

[0066] Formaldehyde solution from the separation tower is generally from about 30 to about 85 percent by weight formaldehyde in methanol solution containing less than about 5 percent water. It should be apparent that effluent from the separation tower is a valuable product in itself. A portion of the stream can optionally be diverted from separation tower **100** for delivery to a destination (not shown) where the stream may subsequently be separated to recover, for example, formaldehyde and methanol and/or dimethyl ether. The stream can alternatively be utilized as a source of feed stock for chemical manufacturing.

[0067] Liquid containing formaldehyde, formic acid and water in methanol is transferred from separation tower **100** through conduits **112** and **45**, by means of pump **14**, and into reactive distillation column **50**. Solid acidic catalyst is present in the reactive distillation column **50** to allow solutions containing water, methanol, formaldehyde, methylal and one or more other polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers to be brought into solid-liquid contact counter-currently with the catalyst to form products including methylal and higher molecular weight polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers. More volatile reaction products are taken overhead from the high efficiency separation apparatus, whereas water and less volatile reaction products are carried down the high efficiency separation apparatus.

[0068] The overhead vapor stream from reactive distillation column **50** is transferred through conduit **52** into condenser **54**. A suitable portion of condensate from condenser **54** is refluxed into reactive distillation column **50** through conduits **55** and **56**. A product stream containing methylal is transferred through conduit **57** to product storage (not shown). Conduit **59** supplies pump **60** with liquid containing higher molecular weight polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers from the bottom of column **50**. A suitable portion of liquid from the bottom of column **50** is transferred, by means of pump **60**, through conduits **62** and **63** into reboiler **64** which is in flow communication with the bottom of the column by means of conduit **66**. A product stream containing higher molecular weight polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers is transferred through conduit **68** to product storage (not shown). Preferably, an anion exchange resin is disposed within a section of the distillation column below the stages of contact with the acidic catalyst to form an essentially acid-free mixture.

[0069] An aqueous side stream containing low levels of unreacted formaldehyde and/or methanol is discharged from column **50** through conduit **58**.

[0070] In view of the features and advantages of the continuous catalytic processes for direct condensation of formaldehyde and dimethyl ether to form a mixture containing one or more polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers in

accordance with this invention, as compared to the known methanol condensation systems previously used, the following example is given.

EXAMPLE

[0071] Products of several condensation runs were composited, and the composite vacuum filtered through a medium glass frit. A 90 gram aliquot of filtrate was shaken with 20 grams of basic ion-exchange resin beads (DOWEX 66) which were then allowed to settle for one hour. The resulting supernatant liquid was then gravity filtered through a medium paper filter. A suitable amount (54 grams) of

[0074] For the purposes of the present invention, “predominantly” is defined as more than about fifty percent. “Substantially” is defined as occurring with sufficient frequency or being present in such proportions as to measurably affect macroscopic properties of an associated compound or system. Where the frequency or proportion for such impact is not clear, substantially is to be regarded as about twenty per cent or more. The term “essentially” is defined as absolutely except that small variations which have no more than a negligible effect on macroscopic qualities and final outcome are permitted, typically up to about one percent.

TABLE I
COMPOSITION OF OVERHEAD FRACTIONS AND BOTTOMS

Fraction	Compound				CH ₃ O(CH ₂ O) _n CH ₃ where the value of n is:						
	Methylal	Methanol	Hemiacetals	Trioxane	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Starting	49.95	0.0	0.69	2.42	22.60	12.42	6.40	3.15	1.45	0.61	
1	97.21	0.95	0.05	0.0	0.46	0	0	0	0	0	
2	93.83	2.52	0.38	0.0	2.84	0	0	0	0	0	
3	20.81	12.92	8.85	2.39	54.80	0.17	0	0	0	0	
4	3.24	11.12	6.40	4.49	74.19	0.57	0	0	0	0	
5	0.56	8.47	2.29	5.83	82.07	0.78	0	0	0	0	
6	0.40	3.10	0.16	7.21	88.05	1.08	0	0	0	0	
7	0.43	0.99	0.0	9.38	86.60	2.55	0.05	0	0	0	
8	0.32	0.47	0.0	11.77	82.98	4.37	0.08	0	0	0	
Bottoms	0.29	0.02	0.0	0.54	1.10	49.49	26.19	13.05	6.34	2.96	

molecular sieve type 3A, which had been activated by calcination at about 538° C., was mixed into the filtrate, and the mixture allowed to stand overnight at ambient temperatures. Liquid was separated from the sieve by vacuum filtration through a medium glass frit. A 45.97 gram aliquot of this acid-free, dry filtrate was charged to a small distillation apparatus consisting of a 100 mL 3-neck flask, a fractionating column and condenser. The charge was distilled into eight overhead fractions which were collected at temperature cuts according to the following schedule.

Schedule of Overhead and Bottom Temperatures

[0072]

Fraction Number	Temperatures, ° C.	
	Overhead	Bottom
1	42 to 46	70 to 94
2	47 to 76	95 to 109
3	77 to 94	110 to 118
4	95 to 100	119 to 127
5	101 to 107	128 to 136
6	108 to 112	137 to 146
7	113 to 123	147 to 162
8	124 to 150	163 to 174

[0073] White solids (possibly paraformaldehyde) were observed in the column and condenser during cuts 2 through 4, but not thereafter. Composition of the distilled fraction and bottoms are given in Table I.

That which is claimed is:

1. A process for the catalytic production of a mixture of oxygenated organic compounds suitable as a blending component of fuel for use in compression ignition internal combustion engines, which process comprises providing a feedstream comprising methanol, a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous acidic catalyst, and a source of formaldehyde formed by the conversion of methanol in the presence of a catalyst comprising copper and zinc as catalyst components which source of formaldehyde comprises from about 30 to about 85 percent by weight formaldehyde in methanol solution containing less than about 5 percent water; heating the feedstream with the heterogeneous acidic catalyst under conditions of reaction sufficient to form an effluent of condensation comprising water, methanol, methylal and one or more polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers which methylal and polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers have structures represented by the formula

$$\text{CH}_3\text{O}(\text{CH}_2\text{O})_n\text{CH}_3$$

where n is a number from 1 to about 10; and contacting at least a liquid portion of the effluent with an anion exchange resin to form an essentially acid-free mixture comprising methylal and polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers having values of n greater than 1.

2. The process according to claim 1 wherein the soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating the heterogeneous acidic catalyst comprises at least one member of the group consisting of low boiling, monobasic organic acids, and the heating of the feedstream with the heterogeneous acidic catalyst employs at least one catalytic

distillation column having internal and/or external stages of contact with the acidic catalyst.

3. The process according to claim 1 which further comprises dehydrating the acid-free mixture using a molecular sieve to obtain an essentially water-free mixture of polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers, and fractionating the water-free mixture as by distillation to obtain an overhead fraction containing methylal and an essentially methylal-free bottom fraction containing polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers having values of n greater than 1.

4. The process according to claim 2 wherein the acidic catalyst comprises at least one cation exchange resin of the group consisting of styrene-divinylbenzene copolymers, acrylic acid-divinylbenzene copolymers, and methacrylic acid-divinylbenzene copolymers, and the soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating the heterogeneous acidic catalyst comprises at least one member of the group consisting of formic acid and acetic acid.

5. The process according to claim 2 wherein the acidic catalyst comprises a sulfonated tetrafluoroethylene resin derivative, and the soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating the heterogeneous acidic catalyst comprises at least one member of the group consisting of formic acid and acetic acid.

6. The process according to claim 1 wherein the heating of the feedstream with the acidic catalyst is carried out at temperatures in a range from about 45° to about 90° C. and employs at least one catalytic distillation column having internal and/or external stages of contact with the acidic catalyst and internal zones to separate methylal from higher polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers.

7. The process according to claim 6 wherein at least a liquid portion of the effluent containing polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers is contacted with an anion exchange resin disposed within a section of the distillation column below the stages of contact with the acidic catalyst to form an essentially acid-free mixture.

8. The process according to claim 6 wherein a source of methanol is admixed with the feedstream, and/or into the stages of contact with the acidic catalyst.

9. The process according to claim 1 which further comprises formation of the feedstream by a process comprising continuously contacting methanol in the vapor phase with a catalytically effective amount of a catalyst consisting of copper, zinc and a member selected from the group consisting of sulfur, selenium and tellurium as catalyst components at elevated temperatures to form a gaseous dehydrogenation mixture comprising formaldehyde, dimethyl ether, dihydrogen and carbon monoxide; cooling the gaseous dehydrogenation mixture with a liquid comprising methanol and collecting formaldehyde therein; and separating a gaseous mixture, comprising predominantly dihydrogen and carbon monoxide, from resulting liquid comprising dimethyl ether, methanol, formaldehyde and formic acid.

10. A process for the catalytic production of a mixture of oxygenated organic compounds suitable as a blending component of fuel for use in compression ignition internal combustion engines, which process comprises providing a feedstream comprising methanol, a soluble condensation promoting component capable of activating a heterogeneous

acidic catalyst, and a source of formaldehyde formed by the conversion of methanol in the presence of a catalyst comprising copper and zinc as catalyst components which source of formaldehyde comprises from about 30 to about 85 percent by weight formaldehyde in methanol solution containing less than about 5 percent water; heating the feedstream with the heterogeneous acidic catalyst under conditions of reaction sufficient to form an effluent of condensation comprising water, methanol, methylal and one or more polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers which methylal and polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers have structures represented by the formula



where n is a number from 1 to about 10; contacting at least a liquid portion of the effluent of condensation with an anion exchange resin to form an essentially acid-free mixture; and fractionating the acid-free mixture as by distillation to obtain an overhead fraction containing methylal and an essentially methylal-free bottom fraction containing polyoxymethylene dimethyl ethers having values of n greater than 1, and further comprises formation of the feedstream by a process comprising continuously contacting methanol in the vapor phase with a catalytically effective amount of a catalyst consisting of copper, zinc and a member selected from the group consisting of sulfur, selenium and tellurium as catalyst components at elevated temperatures to form a gaseous dehydrogenation mixture comprising formaldehyde, dihydrogen and carbon monoxide; cooling the gaseous dehydrogenation mixture with a liquid comprising methanol to take up and hold formaldehyde therein; and separating a gaseous mixture, comprising predominantly dihydrogen and carbon monoxide, from resulting liquid comprising methanol, formaldehyde and formic acid.

11. The process according to claim 10 wherein the catalyst comprises copper, zinc and selenium or tellurium as catalyst components in atomic ratios of 1:0.05-0.5:0.01-0.5 with the proviso that the amount of zinc is at least equal to the amount of selenium or tellurium present in the catalyst, and wherein the elevated temperatures are in a range from about 500° to about 750° C.

12. The process according to claim 10 wherein the catalyst comprises copper, zinc and selenium as catalyst components in an atomic ratios of 1:0.05-0.5:0.05-0.4 with the proviso that the amount zinc is at least equal to the amount of selenium present in the catalyst, and wherein the elevated temperatures are in a range from about 600° to about 700° C.

13. The process according to claim 10 wherein the collecting of formaldehyde is carried out at temperatures in a range downward from about 100° C. to about 25° C. in at least one continuous separation column.

14. The process according to claim 10 wherein the elevated temperatures are maintained in a range from about 600° to about 700° C. using a source of heat derived at least in part from the gaseous mixture comprising dihydrogen and carbon monoxide by combustion thereof.

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