SUBLIMATION/DESUBLIMATION
SEPARATION OF ZrF$_4$ AND HfF$_4$

Jakkie Postma

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SUBLIMATION/DESUBLIMATION SEPARATION OF ZrF$_4$ AND HfF$_4$

By

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SUBLIMATION/DESUBLIMATION SEPARATION OF ZrF\textsubscript{4} AND HfF\textsubscript{4}

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Co-supervisor: Mr HF Niemand

This dissertation details research aimed at the separation of Zr and Hf in the tetrafluoride form. Separation of ZrF\textsubscript{4} and HfF\textsubscript{4} was achieved using sublimation followed by desublimation. The separation involves the sublimation of the tetrafluorides in an inert atmosphere under controlled parameters. The sublimed mass (700 °C to 800 °C) diffuses into nitrogen which then flows across a water-cooled desublimer (annulus) with the aim of desubliming the one metal fluoride in preference to the other. This implies that separation was achieved in both the sublimer and the desublimer, due to differences in both the sublimation and desublimation rates. The aim was for the sublimer residue to be Hf-rich and the desublimer content to be Zr-rich. The Zr/Hf content was determined by means of ICP-OES analysis. It must be noted that the work reported in this thesis is based on only a first sublimation step. The reason for this is that the equipment used was on laboratory scale and that the mass collected from the desublimer was not sufficient to allow a second or third step to be carried out.

Little information was available in the literature on the sublimation separation of Zr and Hf, especially in the fluoride form, most of it being sublimation under vacuum conditions. On an industrial scale, only vacuum sublimation of ZrF\textsubscript{4} has been introduced into the industry, and no information was found for sublimation of ZrF\textsubscript{4} in an inert atmosphere on an industrial scale. There was also limited information on the sublimation rate of ZrF\textsubscript{4} or HfF\textsubscript{4} in an inert atmosphere.

In the process described in this dissertation, optimal temperature selection is crucial since low temperatures result in a low sublimation rate, and high temperatures not only increase the level of impurities in the sublimed product, but also increase the cost of construction material and energy consumption. The aim was to determine the experimental conditions, i.e. sublimation time, temperature and position on the desublimer, which will provide optimal separation conditions. These conditions must, however, be compared with the operating cost, as this will be higher at a higher temperature and for longer sublimation runs.
A model was developed to predict the respective sublimation rates of the two tetrafluorides and to use these rates to determine the separation within the sublimer as well as the partial pressures of the two tetrafluorides in the gas phase. The partial pressures were then used to further model the desublimation of the tetrafluorides on a water-cooled annular surface. The model sufficiently predicted the sublimation rates at lower temperatures, but over-predict at higher temperatures.

A major problem of the experiments was that the sublimation rate formed a plateau before complete sublimation had been achieved. This can be the formation of a crust-like surface or sintered cake which prevented further sublimation from occurring, which may be due to the presence of impurities originating from the zircon. The sublimation temperature remained the same, but sintering of the cake negatively influenced the sublimation kinetics.

The conclusion is that sublimation in an inert atmosphere may be feasible depending on the extent of separation achieved along the length of the desublimer as well as within the sublimer residue. A lower sublimation temperature resulted in better separation but with lower sublimation rates. Vacuum sublimation, however, results in higher fluxes and requires lower temperatures. It is therefore recommended that this work be repeated under vacuum conditions to determine the extent of separation that can be achieved along the length of the desublimer. To stress the importance of the recommendation, it must be noted that sublimation provides dry methods with no liquid waste. It may require fewer steps, which is less labour intensive and requires lower capital cost than other commercial technologies. The major drawback is the high energy requirements to obtain the high separation temperatures, which results in costly construction materials.

Keywords: Sublimation, desublimation, zirconium tetrafluoride, hafnium tetrafluoride
Declaration

I, Catharina Jacoba (Jakkie) Postma, hereby declare that:

- This dissertation has not been submitted, in full or in part, for any degree or examination at any other university;
- This dissertation, along with the research reported therein, is my own work and is expressed in my own words. All the sources that I have used, or partially used, of authors in any form have been indicated and acknowledged at the point of their use as full references.

Mrs. Jakkie Postma

Date

2018/11/27
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Publications

Publications that resulted from this work


Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .................................................................................................................. i

Declaration ........................................................................................................................................ iii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................ iv

Publications ........................................................................................................................................ v

List of figures ....................................................................................................................................... ix

List of tables ....................................................................................................................................... xii

Nomenclature .................................................................................................................................... xiii

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1-1

Chapter 2: Literature ............................................................................................................................. 2-1

2.1 Zirconium and hafnium ............................................................................................................... 2-1

2.2 Processes for the separation of Zr and Hf .................................................................................. 2-2

2.2.1 Fractional crystallisation ......................................................................................................... 2-3

2.2.2 Fractional crystallisation of the double fluorides ................................................................... 2-3

2.2.3 Solvent extraction .................................................................................................................... 2-5

2.2.4 Ion exchange ........................................................................................................................... 2-10

2.2.5 Reduction processes ............................................................................................................... 2-11

2.2.6 Extractive distillation in molten salts ..................................................................................... 2-12

2.2.7 High-pressure vapour-liquid distillation ................................................................................. 2-13

2.3 Sublimation as a purification and separation process ................................................................. 2-14

2.3.1 Sublimation for the separation of Zr from Hf .................................................................... 2-15

2.3.2 Sublimation purification of ZrF₄ from non-volatile impurities (excluding Hf) ................. 2-16

2.4 Apparatus used for sublimation purification of ZrF₄ ................................................................. 2-19

2.4.1 Vacuum sublimation purification (excluding Hf) ................................................................. 2-19

2.4.2 Vacuum sublimation purification (separation of Zr and Hf) ................................................. 2-21

2.4.3 Sublimation purification in an inert atmosphere (excluding Hf) ........................................ 2-23

2.5 Typical sublimation rates of ZrF₄ and HfF₄ ............................................................................... 2-25

2.5.1 Vacuum sublimation ................................................................................................................. 2-25

2.5.2 Sublimation in an inert atmosphere ....................................................................................... 2-31

2.5.3 Scaled-up sublimation processes ............................................................................................ 2-31

2.6 Nuclear specification for Zr ......................................................................................................... 2-32

Chapter 3: Experimental ..................................................................................................................... 3-1
Chapter 5: Preparation and characterisation of Zr(Hf)F₄

5.1 Properties of ZrF₄, HfF₄ and N₂
5.1.1 Vapour pressures
5.1.2 Physical properties of nitrogen
5.1.3 Physical properties of ZrF₄, HfF₄ and other metal fluoride impurities
5.1.4 Thermodynamic properties of ZrF₄ and HfF₄
5.1.5 Diffusion coefficients
5.1.6 Flow properties
5.1.7 Heat transfer
5.1.8 Mass transfer
5.1.9 Lewis number
5.2 Development of a model for the pre-heating of the nitrogen
5.2.1 Model of pre-heating
5.3 Development of a sublimation rate model
5.3.1 Predicting sublimation rates
5.3.2 Sublimation mode
5.3.3 Continuity equation
5.3.4 Sublimation rate model
5.3.5 Flow diagram for calculations of the sublimation process
5.4 Development of a desublimation rate model
5.4.1 Concentration and thermal diffusion contributions to the mass flux
5.4.2 Desublimation mode
5.4.3 Desublimation rate model
5.4.4 Flow calculations for the desublimation rate model
Chapter 6: Results and discussion

6.1 Model parameters

6.1.1 Variables

6.1.2 Constants

6.2 Nitrogen preheating

6.3 Sublimation rate

6.4 Separation within the sublimer

6.5 Separation within the desublimer

6.5.1 Experimental results

6.5.2 Model predictions

6.5.3 Bulk gas temperature

6.6 Modelled partial pressures

6.6.1 Partial pressures of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ across the sublimer and desublimer section

6.6.2 Partial pressures exiting the sublimer section

6.7 Number of sublimation steps determined by the model

6.7.1 Model run at 790 °C sublimation temperature and 30 minutes’ sublimation time

6.7.2 Model run at 760 °C sublimation temperature and 30 minutes’ sublimation time

6.7.3 Model run at 760 °C sublimation temperature and 60 minutes’ sublimation time

Chapter 7: Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

7.2 Recommendations

Chapter 8: References
List of figures

Figure 2-1: Established technologies for the separation of Zr and Hf................................................................. 2-3
Figure 2-2: Sublimation apparatus used by Abate and Wilhelm for the purification of ZrF₄............................ 2-20
Figure 2-3: Sublimation and desublimation system with baffles for the purification of ZrF₄............................ 2-20
Figure 2-4: Sublimation apparatus used by Kotsar et al. for the purification of ZrF₄.............................. 2-21
Figure 2-5: Vacuum sublimation apparatus used by Monnahela et al. for the separation of ZrF₄ and Hff₄................................................................. 2-22
Figure 2-6: Vacuum sublimation apparatus (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002a)................................................. 2-22
Figure 2-7: Sublimation apparatus for the purification of ZrF₄ used by Dai et al. ........................................ 2-23
Figure 2-8: Chemical vapour deposition apparatus used by Fujiura et al. for the synthesis of high-purity ZrF₄........................................................................................................ 2-23
Figure 2-9: Sublimation setup used for the purification of ZrF₄................................................................. 2-24
Figure 2-10: A highly efficient sublimation purification system using baffles with orifices................................. 2-25
Figure 2-11: Influence of temperature on the sublimation rate under vacuum conditions......................... 2-27
Figure 2-12: Area-dependent rate as a function of temperature ................................................................. 2-28
Figure 2-13: Langmuir expression for the sublimation of ZrF₄ under vacuum conditions......................... 2-28
Figure 2-14: Approximate dimensions of the crucible used by MacFarlane (Figure 2-9).............................. 2-31
Figure 3-1: Block flow diagram (BFD) for the sublimation separation of ZrF₄ and Hff₄.................................... 3-1
Figure 3-2: Schematic of the sublimer used.................................................................................................... 3-2
Figure 3-3: Schematic of sublimer and desublimer inside tube furnace...................................................... 3-2
Figure 3-4: Experimental setup for the sublimation/desublimation separation of ZrF₄ and Hff₄............ 3-3
Figure 3-5: Illustration of the sublimation/desublimation setup................................................................. 3-3
Figure 3-6: Image showing sublimer and desublimer in tube oven set at 850 °C. ........................................ 3-4
Figure 3-7: Piping and instrumentation diagram ......................................................................................... 3-5
Figure 4-1: Batch reactor system for the production of Zr(Hf)F₄ from DPDZ and ABF .................... 4-4
Figure 4-2: XRD pattern of Zr(Hf)F₄ overlaid with stick pattern of ZrF₄...................................................... 4-5
Figure 4-3: TGA result of three samples of Zr(Hf)F₄ prepared for sublimation experiments .................. 4-7
Figure 4-4: (a) SEM image indicating very small Zr(Hf)F₄ particles along with the larger zircon and PDZ particles, (b) 30 µm magnification indicating agglomerates of small Zr(Hf) particles........ 4-8
Figure 5-1: Vapour pressures for ZrF₄ and Hff₄ as reported in the literature................................................. 5-1
Figure 5-2: Transparent crystals formed by recrystallisation at 650 °C over a 3-day time period (Robinson & Fuller, 1987) ........................................................................................................................................... 5-6
Figure 5-3: Heat capacity as a function of temperature ........................................................................... 5-7
Figure 5-4: Enthalpy as a function of temperature ...................................................................................... 5-8
Figure 5-5: Entropy as a function of temperature ...................................................................................... 5-8
Figure 6-1: Sublimation rate of Zr(Hf)F$_4$ as a function of the sublimation temperature

Figure 6-2: Sublimer residue indicating cake formation

Figure 6-3: Sublimer residue indicative of hump formation

Figure 6-4: Linear section of the sublimation rate as a function of the temperature

Figure 6-5: Modelled sublimation rates compared with experimental results

Figure 6-6: Slope of the fraction sublimed vs. time as a function of the sublimation temperature

Figure 6-7: Modelled result for the total sublimation time as a function of the sublimation temperature

Figure 6-8: ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ sublimer residue as a function of sublimation time at 790 °C

Figure 6-9: Zr/Hf mole ratio of the sublimer residue as a function of time and temperature

Figure 6-10: Slope of Zr/Hf mole ratio vs. time as a function of the sublimation temperature

Figure 6-11: Sample positions on the desublimer

Figure 6-12: Zr/Hf mole ratio across the length of the desublimer

Figure 6-13: Temperature-dependent mole ratios as a function of desublimer position

Figure 6-14: Linear relationship for the slope of the Zr/Hf mole ratio versus temperature graphs as a function of the position on the desublimer

Figure 6-15: The amount of mass that desublimes is a function of the sublimation temperature

Figure 6-16: Experimental and model results obtained for separation along the length of the desublimer

Figure 6-17: Schematic of sublimer and desublimer inside tube furnace indicating the position of $X_1$ thermocouple

Figure 6-18: Modelled result for cooling of the bulk gas after exiting the sublimer section with the sublimation temperature set at 790 °C

Figure 6-19: Partial pressures of ZrF$_4$ within the sublimer and desublimer

Figure 6-20: Partial pressures of HfF$_4$ within the sublimer and desublimer
Figure 6-21: Partial pressures of ZrF\textsubscript{4} and HfF\textsubscript{4} exiting the sublimer section at 790 °C ................... 6-14
Figure 6-22: Partial pressures of ZrF\textsubscript{4} and HfF\textsubscript{4} exiting the sublimer section at 760 °C ................... 6-14
Figure 6-23: Number of calculated sublimation steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf at a sublimation temperature of 790 °C and removal of the sublimer after 30 minutes ................... 6-16
Figure 6-24: Number of calculated sublimation steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf at a sublimation temperature of 760 °C and removal of the sublimer after 30 minutes ................... 6-17
Figure 6-25: Number of sublimation steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf with a sublimation temperature of 760 °C and removal of the sublimer after 60 minutes ........................................ 6-17
Figure 7-1: Cascade of sublimer/desublimer systems for the separation of Zr and Hf ......................... 7-3
List of tables

Table 2-1: Summary of the sublimation rates obtained for ZrF₄ from the literature data .......... 2-26
Table 2-2: Area-dependent sublimation rates ........................................................................... 2-27
Table 2-3: Specification for nuclear grade Zr sponge............................................................... 2-32
Table 2-4: Permissible impurities in ZrF₄................................................................................. 2-33
Table 4-1: Quantitative XRD results for three batches Zr(Hf)F₄ prepared from DPDZ and ABF .... 4-5
Table 4-2: Calculated low-temperature volatiles in the three respective batches....................... 4-6
Table 4-3: Average particle size distributions .......................................................................... 4-8
Table 4-1: Combined vapour pressure correlations for ZrF₄ and HfF₄................................................. 5-2
Table 5-1: Vapour pressures of metal fluoride impurities (Robinson, 1986: 189)......................... 5-2
Table 5-3: Physical properties of nitrogen at several temperatures and at 100 kPa ..................... 5-3
Table 5-4: Melting, boiling and/or sublimation temperatures of some metal fluorides............... 5-4
Table 5-5: Free energy of formation ......................................................................................... 5-7
Table 5-6: Chemical thermodynamic data for ZrF₄ in the solid and gaseous state....................... 5-7
Table 5-7: Estimating the Lennard-Jones diameter using Spartan software ................................. 5-10
Table 5-8: Estimating collision diameters for ZrF₄ and HfF₄ with N₂ ........................................ 5-10
Table 5-9: Collision integral parameters .................................................................................... 5-11
Table 5-10: Diffusion coefficients for ZrF₄ and HfF₄ in nitrogen at 1 atmosphere ....................... 5-11
Table 5-11: Comparison of calculated diffusivities with literature values .................................. 5-12
Table 5-12: Relationships between fluxes and driving forces ................................................... 5-26
## Nomenclature

### Abbreviations and Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABF</td>
<td>Ammonium bifluoride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alamine 300</td>
<td>Tri-n-octyl amine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alamine 336</td>
<td>Tri-(C8-C10) amine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliquat 336</td>
<td>Tri-(C8-C10) methyl ammonium chloride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amberjet 4200 Cl</td>
<td>Poly(styrene-co-divinylbenzene) with quaternary amine functionality, chloride form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amberlite IRA-400</td>
<td>Strong basic anion resin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMI</td>
<td>Advanced Metals Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASTM</td>
<td>American Society for Testing and Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baddeleyite</td>
<td>ZrO₂ (mineral)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caustic soda</td>
<td>Sodium hydroxide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEZUS</td>
<td>Compagnie Européenne de Zirconium Ugine Sandvik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYANEX 272</td>
<td>Bis(2,4,4-trimethylpentyl)phosphinic acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYANEX 921</td>
<td>Trioctylphosphine oxide (TOPO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYANEX 923</td>
<td>A mixture of fourtrialkyl-phosphine oxides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYANEX 925</td>
<td>A mixture of branched chain alkylated phosphine oxides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2EHPA</td>
<td>Di-2-ethylhexylphosphoric acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBBP</td>
<td>Dibutyl butylphosphonate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIBK</td>
<td>Diisobutyl ketone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DMHP</td>
<td>Di-(1-methylheptyl) methylphosphonate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowex-1</td>
<td>Strong basic anion resin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowex-50</td>
<td>Strong acid cation resin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPDZ</td>
<td>Desilicated Plasma Dissociated Zircon (Zr(Hf)₂O₅)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DST</td>
<td>Department of Science and Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GD-OES</td>
<td>Glow Discharge optical emission spectroscopy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Chemical reaction and equilibrium software with extensive thermochemical database and flowsheet simulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSCN</td>
<td>Thiocyanic acid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kerosene</td>
<td>A mixture of liquid hydrocarbons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIX 63</td>
<td>5,8-diethyl-7-hydroxy-6-dodecanone oxime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LM</td>
<td>Liquid membrane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviation | Definition
--- | ---
Mercaptans | Organosulphur compounds that contain a carbon-bonded sulfhydryl group
MIBK | Methyl isobutyl ketone
Necsa | The South African Nuclear Energy Corporation SOC. Ltd.
NMDN | Nuclear Materials Development Network
PDZ | Plasma-dissociated zircon (Zr(Hf)O₂·SiO₂)
ppm | Parts per million
SCN | Thiocyanate
SEM | Scanning Electron Microscope
SLM | Supported liquid membrane
Solvesso 150 | Heavy aromatic solvent naphtha
TBP | Tributyl phosphate
TNOA | Tri-n-octylamine
TODGA | N,N,N’,N’-tetraoctyldiglycolamide
XRD | X-Ray Diffraction
Zircon | ZrSiO₄ or Zr(Hf)SiO₄ to place emphasis on Hf impurity

Description of symbols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbols</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A_{flow}</td>
<td>Flow area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A_{sub}</td>
<td>Sublimation area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A_{pipe}</td>
<td>Surface area of the pipe used for pre-heating the nitrogen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Half the base of the sublimer bulk mass width</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cp</td>
<td>Heat capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D_e</td>
<td>Equivalent diameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D_{eH}</td>
<td>Equivalent diameter of heat transfer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D_{LN2}</td>
<td>Diffusion coefficient of either ZrF₄ or HfF₄ in nitrogen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D_{iT}</td>
<td>Thermal diffusion coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D₁</td>
<td>Outer diameter of the inner pipe of the annulus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D₂</td>
<td>Inner diameter of the outer pipe annulus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔG_f</td>
<td>Standard Gibbs energy of formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr</td>
<td>Grashof number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gz</td>
<td>Graetz number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbols</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta H_{sub}$</td>
<td>Enthalpy of sublimation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$h_{conv}$</td>
<td>Convective heat transfer coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta H_{form}$</td>
<td>Free energy of formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta H_f$</td>
<td>Standard enthalpy of formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta H$</td>
<td>Incremental height of the fraction of the bed that sublimed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$J_i^{\omega}$</td>
<td>Contribution of concentration to mass flux in the desublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$J_i^{T}$</td>
<td>Contribution of thermal diffusion to mass flux in the desublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k$</td>
<td>Thermal conductivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\kappa$</td>
<td>Boltzmann constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_i$</td>
<td>Mass transfer coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k_i^{\omega}$</td>
<td>Mass transfer coefficient in the desublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$L_{c,desub}$</td>
<td>Characteristic length for the annulus section of the desublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$L_{c,sub}$</td>
<td>Characteristic length in the sublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Le$</td>
<td>Lewis number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$m$</td>
<td>Mass flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_{i,t_{1+t}}$</td>
<td>Residual mass of ZrF$_4$ or HfF$_4$ at time $t$ in the sublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$MM$</td>
<td>Molecular weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M_B$</td>
<td>Mass of a Brownian particle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N_i$</td>
<td>Number of moles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\dot{n}_j$</td>
<td>Molar flux at a specific position in the sublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Nu$</td>
<td>Nusselt number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$P$</td>
<td>Pressure</td>
</tr>
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<td>$P_i'$</td>
<td>Vapour pressure</td>
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<td>Partial pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>$Re$</td>
<td>Reynolds number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$r_i$</td>
<td>Rate of sublimation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Sc$</td>
<td>Schmidt number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$Sh$</td>
<td>Sherwood number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_{w}$</td>
<td>Walk speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S_T$</td>
<td>Soret coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S^o$</td>
<td>Standard entropy of formation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$S$</td>
<td>Source term used in the continuity equation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Symbols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbols</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$T_w$</td>
<td>Temperature at the wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$T_b$</td>
<td>Temperature in the bulk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t$</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$u$</td>
<td>Velocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$x_i$</td>
<td>Mole fraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta z$</td>
<td>The length of the segment between positions $j$ and $j + 1$ in the sublimer and/or desublimer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Description of Greek letters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek letter</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\alpha ZrF_4$</td>
<td>Tetragonal ZrF$_4$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta ZrF_4$</td>
<td>Monoclinic ZrF$_4$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>Gas expansion coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\gamma_i$</td>
<td>Activity coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\epsilon$</td>
<td>Molecular interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\mu$</td>
<td>Dynamic viscosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\rho$</td>
<td>Density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\rho_B$</td>
<td>Density of the bulk material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\sigma_{L\mathrm{N}2}$</td>
<td>Collision diameter of nitrogen with either ZrF$_4$ or HfF$_4$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\sigma_i$</td>
<td>Lennard-Jones diameter of the respective spherical molecule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\omega_i$</td>
<td>Mass fraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Omega_D$</td>
<td>Collision integral</td>
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### Description of subscripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscript</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>Bulk phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$f$</td>
<td>Film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$g$</td>
<td>Gas phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$i$</td>
<td>Represents either ZrF$_4$ or HfF$_4$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$j$</td>
<td>Incremental length in the sublimer and desublimer in the direction of the gas flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$k$</td>
<td>Incremental length indicator for the pre-heating section of the nitrogen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$s$</td>
<td>Sublimer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$t$</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$w$</td>
<td>Wall</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Zirconium (Zr) ores typically contain between 1 % and 3 % hafnium (Hf) (Xu et al., 2012). The use of Zr metal in the nuclear industry requires an Hf content of <100 ppm, owing to its high neutron cross-section (Brown & Healy, 1978). Therefore the separation step is key in the preparation of nuclear-grade Zr metal, which is considered to be very difficult due to the various similarities of their chemical properties (Smolik et al., 2009). Generally the preparation of Hf-free Zr relies on the traditional wet routes, for example solvent extraction systems. In contrast to the traditional aqueous chloride systems, the dry processes have the advantage of producing much less hazardous chemical waste.

The New Metals Development Network (NMDN) of the Advanced Materials Initiative (AMI) was created by the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in 2006, with the mandate to develop new processes for beneficiation relating to the elements Zr, Hf, Ta and Nb. The current work attempts to develop a process involving the beneficiation of the mineral zircon (ZrSiO₄) to produce nuclear-grade Zr metal. The zircon contains Hf as an impurity. To indicate this, the formula Zr(Hf)SiO₄ is used throughout this text. Zr and Hf occur in the zircon crystal structure in identical crystallographic positions.

The proposed Zr metal recovery process involves the plasma dissociation of the Zr(Hf)SiO₄, which results in a much higher chemical reactivity. Here the zircon particles condense upon cooling as microcrystals of Zr(Hf)O₂ embedded in the amorphous silica matrix, which is referred to as plasma-dissociated zircon (PDZ, i.e. Zr(Hf)O₂·SiO₂). The PDZ is then desilicated (DPDZ or Zr(Hf)O₂) and fluorinated with ammonium bifluoride (ABF) to produce Zr(Hf)F₄. Separation of Hf from the Zr can be achieved either by the tetrafluoride or tetrachloride form, although the latter will require an additional chlorination step. The next step is the plasma reduction of the tetrahalide to the metal and finally purification of the metal powder in a high-temperature vacuum furnace (Nel et al., 2013; Retief et al., 2011). The nomenclature Zr(Hf)F₄ defines a ZrF₄ crystal structure in which 1 % to 3 % of the Hf is substituted for Zr. ZrF₄ and HfF₄ behave differently according to temperature in the vapour phase, i.e. due to the difference in vapour pressures. This implies that HfF₄ is thermodynamically more stable than ZrF₄ at a specific temperature. It is therefore assumed that ZrF₄ will sublime separately from the HfF₄ due to the differences in the thermodynamic stability of the two compounds.
Sublimation, together with distillation techniques, is considered the most convenient and effective method for removing metal fluoride impurities from ZrF₄. Sublimation and distillation processes provide dry methods with no liquid waste. They may require fewer steps, which is less labour intensive and requires lower capital costs compared to other commercial technologies. The major drawbacks are the high energy requirements to obtain the high separation temperatures, resulting in expensive construction materials. Purification by sublimation and subsequent crystallisation is normally more effective than distillation because no liquid is present from which impurities have to be extracted from the vapours in the cooling chamber. There is also no significant extent of dissolution of gaseous impurities by the crystallised product as compared to the liquid. The partial vapour pressures of the impurities are also insignificant and therefore do not permit the formation of a new independent liquid or solid phase (Robertson, 1932).

In this process, separation of the ZrF₄ and HfF₄ is achieved using sublimation followed by desublimation. The separation involves the sublimation of the tetrafluorides in an inert atmosphere under controlled parameters. The sublimed mass (700 °C to 800 °C) diffuses into nitrogen which is then allowed to flow across a water-cooled desublimer (annulus) with the aim of desubliming the one metal fluoride in preference to the other. This implies that separation is achieved in both the sublimer and desublimer, due to differences in both the sublimation and desublimation rates. Separation is further achieved along the length of the desublimer. The sublimation rates depend on the vapour pressures at the respective temperatures as well as the concentration and/or partial pressure differences. The aim is for the sublimer residue to be Hf-rich and the desublimer content Zr-rich. The Zr/Hf content is determined by means of ICP-OES analysis.

A sublimation and desublimation model was developed to predict the sublimation and desublimation rates of both ZrF₄ and HfF₄ in the tetrafluoride form in an inert gas. These rates were then used to determine the Zr/Hf mole ratios to those obtained experimentally. The aim is to provide experimental conditions, i.e. sublimation time, temperature and position on the desublimer, which provide optimal separation conditions. These conditions must, however, be compared to the operating cost, as this will be higher at a higher temperature and for longer sublimation runs.
Chapter 2: Literature

2.1 Zirconium and hafnium

Zirconium was discovered in 1789 by Martin Heinrich Klaproth, in Berlin, Germany. The name zirconium originates from the Arabic word "zargun" meaning "gold colour", which describes the colour of the gemstone now known as zircon. It is the eleventh most abundant element in the earth’s crust, which amounts to approximately 0.028 % (Benedict et al., 1981). Zr and Hf occur together in nature and can be found in minerals such as zircon and Baddeleyite, with zircon being the most commercially available source (Banda et al., 2013). These ores typically contain between 1 % to 3 % Hf (Xu et al., 2012).

There is currently a worldwide production (the largest producers being Australia, South Africa and the US) of approximately 1 million metric tons of zircon per year, of which 5 % is used for the production of Zr metal and alloys (Konings et al., 2012), while the rest ends up in the refractory industry or ceramics.

Hafnium was discovered in 1923 by Hevesy and Coster (Hevesy, 1925; Hansen et al., 1950; Kragh & Robertson, 1979). Separation of these two elements then became a concern. Soon after the discovery, the mineral was fused with acidic potassium fluoride and the melt was extracted with hot water containing HF and the potassium Zr fluoride was re-crystallized from a water solution. Separation of the two elements was achieved after several re-crystallisations steps.

Another attempt at separation was made shortly thereafter by van Arkel and De Boer in 1924, who were able to demonstrate considerable separation between the two elements by means of fractional distillation. Gruen and Katz continued this research and reported an Hf reduction from 2.5 % to 0.2 % (Gruen & Katz, 1949).

Currently the key producers of low-hafnium zirconium for the nuclear industry are France (AREVA), the US (Westinghouse), Russia (Rusatom, TVEL), Global Nuclear Fuel (the US and Japan) and South Korea (KEPCO Nuclear Fuel) (Ux Consulting, 2013).

The use of Zr in the nuclear industry requires an Hf content of less than 100 ppm (Smolik et al., 2009). Recent articles reported Zr metal specifications with Hf values of less than 50 ppm (Banda et al., 2013; Waseda & Isshiki, 2001). Separation of these two elements is extremely difficult due to their
chemical similarities in both their metallic and compound states. These similarities are greater than any other homologous elements in the periodic table (Yang et al., 2002). Zr and Hf have similar atomic radii, similar configurations of valence electrons (Favre-Régullion et al., 2007) along with various other chemical and physical similarities. Furthermore, Zr and Hf have a very high reactivity towards oxygen, nitrogen, carbon and hydrogen, which emphasizes the extreme difficulty of producing Hf-free Zr of high purity (Waseda & Isshiki, 2001). Even so, by the 1960s, Hf-free Zr had already been produced by several US companies (Benedict et al., 1981).

The Zr grade used in alloy production, which is used for the construction of nuclear fuel elements and other reactor core components, has a direct effect on the efficiency of the reactor core and therefore the cost of producing nuclear power (Yang et al., 2002). The use of Zr is possible due to the low thermal neutron capture cross-section of Zr (0.18 barns), whereas that of Hf is 640 times higher (Yang et al., 2002). The key to preparing nuclear grade Zr therefore lies in the separation technology of Zr and Hf (Xu et al., 2012).

2.2 Processes for the separation of Zr and Hf

Metals can be separated by taking advantage of occurrences where there are substantial differences in water solubilities, organic solvents, fused salts or liquid metals. These occurrences are, however, very rare for Zr and Hf (Benedict et al., 1981).

One of the major processes used for the separation of Zr and Hf is solvent extraction. Solvent extraction is, however, a complex and expensive process to use for the separation of Zr and Hf (Begovich & Sisson, 1983). Additionally, the solvent extraction process using methyl isobutyl ketone (MIBK) as the extractant has several disadvantages and several attempts at direct separation of the two metals in their chloride form have been made. These include fractional sublimation, distillation of the chlorides under pressure and extractive distillation using several solvents. Up to 1984, none of these methods had been developed into industrial processes due to the many technological problems that could not be reliably resolved (Moulin et al., 1984).

The three technologies currently used in industry for the separation of Zr and Hf are multiple crystallisation of potassium Zr/Hf fluoride (K₂Zr(Hf)F₆), solvent extraction using MIBK or tributyl phosphate (TBP) and extractive distillation with a potassium chloride–aluminium chloride mixture (KCl–AlCl₃) – solvent extraction and distillation being the two major processes (Barberis, 2008; Favre-Régullion et al., 2007; Konings et al., 2012). Poriel et al. summarized some of the established technologies (Figure 2-1) for the separation of Zr and Hf (Poriel et al., 2006).
These processes for the separation of Zr and Hf, along with others listed in the literature, are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

2.2.1 Fractional crystallisation

Some of the most successful methods of fractional crystallisation are those using phosphates, potassium, ammonium double fluorides and ferrocyanides (Hansen *et al.*, 1950).

Others include the crystallisation of ammonium or potassium zirconium oxalate, crystallisation of zirconium oxychloride with basic chlorides or with organic acids and zirconium sulphate with hydrogen peroxide, to name but a few (Hevesy, 1925).

2.2.2 Fractional crystallisation of the double fluorides

The original method used for separation of Hf from Zr was the fractional crystallisation of the double potassium fluorides, in which multiple recrystallisations are necessary since these salts form solid solutions and have a solubility ratio close to unity (Benedict *et al.*, 1981). Both hexafluorides and heptafluorides can be obtained by the addition of potassium or ammonium fluoride to ZrF₄. The solubilities of the heptafluorides of Hf and Zr are practically the same, whereas the solubilities of the hexafluorides are such that separation of the two elements is possible (Hevesy, 1925). The ammonium hexafluorides of Zr and Hf have higher solubilities, whereas the corresponding potassium hexafluorides have larger differences between the solubilities of the Zr and Hf compounds. The
solubility of the Hf compound is greater than that of the Zr compound, resulting in the crystallisation of the Zr compounds in preference to the Hf compounds (Branken, 2009; Hevesy, 1925).

In 1955 it was found that 10 recrystallisation steps are required to reduce the Hf content from 2 % to 0.1 %. Optimisation of the operation temperatures and solubilities of a similar process was done in 1956. It was found that up to 18 recrystallisation steps were necessary to reduce the Hf content to 0.003 %, with a Zr yield of 80 % (Benedict et al. 1981).

In 2010, Branken et al. studied the influence of potassium fluoride (KF) and hydrogen fluoride (HF) on the selectivity of Zr and Hf separation by fractional crystallisation of K₂Zr(Hf)F₆. Their work indicated that crystallisation from KF solutions leads to the formation of K₂Zr(Hf)F₇ with an increasing KF concentration, which leads to a decrease in the selectivity. This is in good agreement with the work done by Hevesy (Hevesy, 1925) who showed that the heptafluorides of ammonium and potassium are practically insoluble. Branken et al. showed that the addition of HF to the crystallisation solution suppressed the formation of the K₂Zr(Hf)F₇. Although selectivities obtained were still very low, they were much higher than the crystallisation selectivities from solutions of high KF concentrations without HF and also from water only solutions (Branken & Lachmann, 2010). The addition of HF to the KF solution was also suggested by Coster and Hevesy (Coster & Hevesy, 1927).

**Fractional crystallisation of the phosphates**

Appreciable differences exist between the solubilities of the phosphates of Zr and Hf, with the Hf phosphate being less soluble in strong mineral acids (Hevesy & Kimura, 1925). The phosphate precipitate can be dissolved in HF and allowed to crystallize, resulting in a compound containing Zr, phosphorus and fluorine (Hevesy, 1925). According to Hevesy, preference is to be given to the crystallisation of the phosphates among all other crystallisation methods. One possible disadvantage to this process is that the phosphate compounds formed are not readily converted to other compounds (Hansen et al., 1950).

**Recent work on fractional crystallisation**

A patent was recently issued which claims to remove traces of Zr from Hf compounds by making particular use of Zr containing Hf tetrakis (dimethylamide). The mixtures are melted and held at a set temperature thereby obtaining two phases, one crystalline and one liquid, with the liquid phase containing the lowest Zr concentration (Reuter et al., 2009).
2.2.3 Solvent extraction

Traditional liquid-liquid extraction

Extraction is the process of drawing a compound out of a mixture by means of a solvent. Liquid-liquid extraction, also known as solvent extraction and partitioning, is more specific. It is a separation method in which compounds are separated based on their relative solubilities in two different solvents.

A limited number of extractants and extraction systems have been used in the separation of Zr and Hf for selectively extracting either Zr or Hf (Deorkar & Khopkar, 1991; Xu et al., 2012).

The major solvent extraction process used for the purification and removal of Hf is the MIBK-thiocyanate (SCN) process (Konings et al., 2012). Other processes include TBP, CYANEX and amine-based extractants.

**MIBK-SCN**

In a study noted around 1957 (Benedict et al., 1981), the Oak Ridge National Laboratory concluded that solvent extraction of SCN was the best commercial method, in which an HCl solution of the oxychloride as the aqueous phase was recommended, with a mixture of MIBK and thiocyanic acid (HSCN) as an organic solvent. In this system an Hf-Zr separation factor of 5 is obtained. Operating plants with a capacity of 400 kg·h⁻¹ have been reported (Benedict et al., 1981).

In the solvent extraction system of the US Bureau of Mines Plant (Benedict et al., 1981), commercial grade Zr(Hf)Cl₄ was dissolved in water together with ammonium thiocyanate (NH₄SCN) and ammonium hydroxide (NH₄OH). Zr and Hf form SCN complexes ((Zr/Hf)O(SCN)₂) which can be extracted with the use of HSCN and MIBK in a counter-current solvent extraction system, preferentially extracting the Hf into the organic phase. Sulphuric acid (H₂SO₄) was added to the organic phase for stripping of the Hf. A hydrochloric acid (HCl) scrub solution was used to transfer the remaining Zr from the MIBK stream back into the aqueous phase, after which zirconium hydroxide (Zr(OH)₄) was precipitated from the aqueous product stream containing 0.004 % Hf.

Disadvantages of the widely used MIBK-thiocyanic solvent extraction process include (Brown & Wain, 1978; Da Silva & Distin, 1998):

- the high aqueous solubility of the MIBK
- the low flash point of the MIBK
• the formation of gaseous contaminants such as hydrogen sulphide (H₂S), hydrogen cyanide (HCN) and mercaptans from the decomposition of the SCN complexes in HCl medium
• the aqueous raffinate containing SCN, which could have disposal implications.

**TBP**

In contrast to the MIBK process, when using TBP as the extractant, Hf is concentrated in the aqueous phase and Zr in the organic phase.

The feed stream to the TBP process can be obtained by the reaction of zircon sand with molten caustic soda (also known as sodium hydroxide or NaOH). This process is also referred to as caustic fusion. The product of this process is washed with cold water and centrifuged to give hydrated Zr oxide. Cox et al. found that initial dissolution of the washed product in HCl or sulphuric acid (H₂SO₄) followed by secondary dissolution in nitric acid (HNO₃) resulted in a product of the required specification. A solution of TBP with n-heptane and HNO₃ is used for the extraction of Zr from the feed stream (Cox et al. 1958; Stephens, 1984).

The French Atomic Energy Commission (Benedict et al., 1981) fractionally extracted Zr from Hf with an organic phase consisting of TBP and kerosene and an aqueous phase consisting of Zr(NO₃)₄ and Hf(NO₃)₄ in a mixture of HNO₃ and NaNO₃. A separation factor of 10 with a plant capacity of 24 kg Zr per day containing less than 0.02 % Hf was obtained.

The work by Cox et al. indicated that the use of only HNO₃ as a salting agent (i.e. no NaNO₃) is more preferable for use in a commercial process. Zr and Hf nitrates were separated by extracting them with TBP diluted with n-heptane, which shortens the time required for separation of the phases. Separation factors of up to 36 were reported and the Hf content in the Zr was reduced to less than 100 ppm (Cox et al., 1958). The information gathered in the pilot plant provided the design data for separation on a commercial scale (Benedict et al., 1981). Disadvantages (Branken, 2009; Brown and Wain, 1978) were:

• the requirement for high TBP concentrations at high acidities
• Hf purification from Zr is difficult from a practical standpoint
• high consumption rates of chemicals
• constraints regarding low metal concentrations in both phases.
**CYANEX as an extractant**

Several types of CYANEX extractants have been reported in the literature. These include CYANEX 272, 921, 923 and 925, of which the latter two have shown better performance. However, the disadvantages to the two extractants are that CYANEX 925 has a high cost compared to conventional TBP and CYANEX 923 on its own causes third phase formation at Zr concentrations exceeding 8 g/L (Nayl et al., 2009; Taghizadeh et al., 2011).

**CYANEX 923**

In 2011, the separation of Zr and Hf was studied using a mixture of TBP and CYANEX 923 (Taghizadeh et al., 2011). The process of Zr and Hf separation was successful, without the risk of third phase formation. Higher metal extractions were obtained with lower acid concentrations when compared to the conventional TBP/HNO₃ processes. This process has the advantage of lower chemical consumption rates as well as lower disposal costs. Separation factors as high as 186 were obtained.

**CYANEX 272**

Taghizadeh et al. determined optimum process conditions for the extraction and separation of Zr and Hf. The extractants studied were TBP, D2EHPA and CYANEX 272. They found the optimum for selective extraction of Zr to be 80 % when using HNO₃ and CYANEX 272 as extractant. The same was true for the separation of Zr and Hf with a separation factor of 34 (Taghizadeh et al., 2008). They continued to study the stoichiometric relation of this extraction process in 2009 (Taghizadeh et al., 2009).

In 2013, Banda et al. selectively extracted Zr over Hf from H₂SO₄ solutions using D2EHPA or CYANEX 272 or a mixture thereof with LIX 63. D2EHPA gave better separation than CYANEX 272 with separation factors of approximately 30, whereas mixtures of D2EHPA or CYANEX 272 with LIX 63 did not indicate sufficient selectivity towards extracting Hf over Zr (Banda et al., 2013).

**CYANEX 921**

Nayl et al. studied the extraction of Zr and Hf from nitrate mediums by using CYANEX 921, CYANEX 923 or CYANEX 925 in kerosene. At optimum conditions, separation factors of 17, 21.4 and 40.7 were obtained for the respective extractants, with reasonably fast extraction rates (Nayl et al., 2009).

**Amine extraction**

Takahashi (Takahashi et al., 1984) separated Zr from Hf in a counter-current mixer-settler by means of an anionic exchange mechanism and replacing the MIBK with a high-molecular alkyl amine. The
organic phase was a mixture of tri-n-octyl amine, tridecanol, tri-n-paraffin (kerosene) and sulphuric acid. The aqueous phase was prepared by digesting sodium zirconate in sulphuric acid to produce Zr and Hf oxysulphates. Here the Hf content is concentrated in the organic phase while the Zr is concentrated in the aqueous phase, with separation factors of up to 20. Pure Zr(OH)$_4$ is precipitated by neutralizing the aqueous solution with NaOH. One advantage of this process is that most trace element impurities are also separated from Zr, except for uranium (U), which can be removed by adding a pre-extraction step to the process.

Poriel et al. studied the extraction in a solution of HCl and Aliquat 336 as the extractant (Poriel et al., 2006) to preferentially extract Zr by means of an anionic exchange mechanism. Their work indicated that separation is possible with separation factors of up to 14, provided that the feed solution is a mixture of Zr(Hf)Cl$_4$ in concentrated HCl. This is necessary to maintain the extraction equilibrium since it inhibits the formation of polynuclear hydroxy-bridged compounds.

Van der Westhuizen also employed separation with amine extractants Alamine 336 and Aliquat 336, with recovery of the Zr species in the organic phase. Extraction was tested on both fluoride and chloride-based compounds ((K$_2$Zr(Hf)F$_6$ and Zr(Hf)Cl$_4$ respectively) and only the chloride compounds provided successful separation (Van der Westhuizen, 2009).

Van der Westhuizen highlighted the following advantages of using amines as extractants (Van der Westhuizen, 2009):

- they reduce cost
- they are more environmentally and user friendly
- no requirement for stripping chemicals for the recovery of the Zr solutes
- high solute loading capacity relative to chemical consumption
- high selectivity towards Zr.

The major disadvantage of the process discussed above is the requirement of high acidities in the aqueous feed solution, which poses some economic and engineering problems.

In 2012, Banda et al. (2012) separated Zr from Hf in a HCl solution using amine-based extractants. They found that Alamine 300 and Alamine 336 produced better separation than other amine-based extractants and Alamine 336 gave the highest separation factor. These were based on a batch simulation of counter-current extraction, yielding extractions of Zr and Hf of 98.5 % and 12.5 % respectively (Banda et al., 2012).
**Other solvent extraction processes for the separation of Zr and Hf**

Brown *et al.* investigated the solvent extraction of Zr from Hf in HNO₃ solutions using a new extractant, dibutyl butylphosphonate (DBBP), in Solvesso 150. This process required lower acidities compared to the TBP process and the new extractant did not require the use of a salting agent. In this process the Hf content could be reduced to below nuclear specifications and purification from uranium was also achieved in a 10-stage Croda mixer-settler. Separation coefficients for Zr/Hf ranged from 6 to 42 depending on the acidity and Zr concentrations. Separation factors for Zr/U of 40 to 150 were obtained and depended on the acidity of the HNO₃ solution (Brown & Healy, 1978).

XU *et al.* optimized a solvent extraction system for the separation of Zr and Hf in an HSCN medium using a mixture of diisobutyl ketone (DIBK) and TBP as the extractant. A separation factor of Hf from Zr of 9.3 was obtained. It was found that the DIBK selectively extracted the minor metal (Hf) from HSCN solutions to meet the high grade specifications, but with lower separation coefficients than that obtained with MIBK. DIBK is preferred to MIBK in industrial applications due to its high flash point, high boiling point and low solubility, whereas MIBK has a high water solubility and it burns and volatilizes easily (Xu *et al.*, 2012).

The research of Da Silva and Distin also describes how the problems with MIBK could be overcome by using organophosphorous extractants (Da Silva & Distin, 1998).

Other extractants used for the extraction of Zr and Hf from HCl solutions include dicyclohexyl-18-crown-6 in dichloromethane (Deorkar & Khopkar, 1991) and TODGA for extraction from HNO₃ solutions (Saleh, 2012).

The above are only a few of the numerous methods reported in the literature for the separation of Zr and Hf using solvent extraction.

**Membrane-based solvent extraction and pertraction**

Separation with solvent extraction can be achieved in multi-stages of two separate steps (extraction and stripping) with the use of an extractant. Solvent extraction is regarded as a promising method for the separation of metallic elements (Banda *et al.*, 2013), but it has the disadvantages of emulsification, flooding and loading limits, phase disengagement and large solvent inventory (Yang *et al.*, 2002).
The use of a liquid membrane (LM) offers high selectivity in a single operation since it combines both extraction and stripping. A liquid membrane is formed if two miscible fluids are separated by a third immiscible liquid that enables mass transport between the fluids. The idea of using a liquid membrane for separations in three-phase systems is quite new and its use has been very limited for the difficult Zr and Hf separation (Štefan Schlosser, 2009; Yang et al., 2002).

Supported liquid membranes (SLM) using microporous membranes feature simultaneous extraction and stripping, therefore equilibrium limitations and ratios of aqueous/organic ratios are not applicable. This thin microporous membrane is impregnated with an organic solvent which assists in separating the feed and stripping solutions and eliminates the disadvantages associated with solvent extraction (Yang et al., 2002).

In 2002, Yang et al. studied SLMs with hollow fibres (polypropylene with 600 µm inner diameter and 0.2 µm pore diameter) as substrates and TNOA or Aliquat 336 as extracting agents. This process has very high efficiencies with a high surface-to-volume ratio and low organic extractant inventory, but for various economic and technical reasons, it was found that this process is only useful for laboratory and pilot scale production units (Yang et al., 2002).

Pertraction, however, has the advantage of increased stability compared to SLMs, but it has the disadvantage of requiring two membranes, one for the organic phase and another for the stripping of the metal back into the aqueous phase (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2012). This problem can be overcome with emulsified pertraction. Van der Westhuizen et al. registered a patent in 2012 which claimed a method to separate Zr and Hf by using membrane-based solvent extraction and in particular pertraction and emulsified pertraction (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2012).

### 2.2.4 Ion exchange

Several ion exchange processes for the separation of Zr and Hf can be found in the literature. This technology has been extensively applied in analytical separations, which have been shown to be much more effective than conventional solvent extraction techniques (Yang et al., 1999). Different anion and cation ion exchangers are employed, with the most often used being the strong-base anion exchange resins to adsorb Zr in preference to Hf and cation exchange resins, where Hf is preferentially adsorbed (Smolik et al., 2009).
One of the most often studied cation exchange resins is Dowex 50 with the use of several different acid mediums (Street & Seaborg, 1948; Benedict et al., 1954; Qureshi & Husain, 1971; Hurst, 1983; Begovich & Sisson, 1983).

Kraus and Moore studied the separation of Zr and Hf with a Dowex-1 anion exchanger with a mixture of HCl and HF as effluent (Kraus & Moore, 1949). Similar work was done by Huffman and Lilly but with the use of an Amberlite IRA-400 in place of the Dowex-1 (Huffman & Lilly, 1951).

Byers et al. registered two patents on the separation using continuous ion exchange chromatography in sulphate solutions with an anionic exchange resin (Byers et al., 1997) and in chloride solutions with either anionic or cationic resins (Byers et al., 1998). No mention is made of the type of resin. These processes promise very good efficiencies as well as separation factors.

Yang et al. (1999) studied the separation using TNOA and/or Aliquat 336 on a styrene/divinylbenzene copolymer resin and HCl. Aliquat 336 showed the best selectivity towards Zr and Hf separation, with separation factors up to 164.

More recent investigations of the separation of Zr and Hf with the use of ion exchange with commercially available resins have been reported. These include the Amberjet 4200 Cl anion exchange resin (Favre-Réguillon et al., 2007) and the Diphonix® resin used in chelating cation exchangers (Smolik et al., 2009).

### 2.2.5 Reduction processes

Newnham separated Zr and Hf by preferential reduction of their tetrachlorides. This was achieved by heating the crude tetrachloride with Zr powder to thereby reduce the tetrachloride to the non-volatile trichloride, without reducing the Hf tetrachloride. After sublimation separation, the Hf content in the residual Zr trichloride was reduced to less than 0.05 % (Newnham, 1956).

In the “Megy Process” a very high separation factor is obtained if a mixture of Na$_2$ZrF$_6$ and Na$_2$HfF$_6$ is reduced by aluminium dissolved in liquid zinc. This partial reduction reaction occurs in a graphite-lined container at 900 °C. Two immiscible salt phases are formed, a light phase rich in Hf and a heavy phase rich in Zr, which can then be separated from each other. Reducing the Hf content to below 0.01 % required contacting of the Zr-rich phase with a liquid mixture consisting of ZnF$_2$ and NaF to again produce a mixture of Na$_2$ZrF$_6$ and Na$_2$HfF$_6$, making the production of reactor-grade Zr possible in as few as two salt-metal contacting stages (Megy, 1978; Benedict et al., 1981).
2.2.6 Extractive distillation in molten salts

Soon after the discovery of the element Hf, de Boer wrote a paper in which he discussed the preparation of pure Zr compounds by means of double compounds with phosphorus chlorides, in which \((\text{ZrCl}_4)_2\cdot\text{PCl}_5\) and \((\text{ZrCl}_4)_2\cdot\text{POCl}_3\) are formed which melt and provide a means for purification of impurities after a single distillation of the salts (excluding HfCl\(_4\) and double compounds). Purification from Hf was achieved with further fractional distillations (Boer, 1927).

In the majority of cases the extractive distillation process used is a counter-current vapour phase distillation column whereby Zr(Hf)Cl\(_4\) vapours are contacted with a KCl-AlCl\(_3\) solvent at 350 °C and at atmospheric pressure (the CEZUS process). The solvent (Zr enriched) is passed through a stripping column where nitrogen gas is passed through the solvent for the recovery of ZrCl\(_4\). Pure HfCl\(_4\) can be produced from the vapour phase (Hf enriched) with a few alterations to the process (Branken, 2009; Konings et al., 2012; Moulin et al., 1984; Niselson et al., 2009).

This process was patented in 1977 (Besson et al., 1977), in which the authors claimed a continuous process for recovering ZrCl\(_4\) with less than 200 ppm Hf with a molten solvent selected from the group consisting of an alkali metal chloroaluminate, an alkali metal chloroferrate and mixtures thereof. Besson et al. specified the pressure as atmospheric pressure and the alkali metal as potassium. This patent was based on information gained from pilot plant operation. A full-scale production plant was built which corresponded to a Zr sponge production of 1 600 tons per year (Moulin et al., 1984). This process does, however, require an additional sublimation step for the removal of the remaining impurities as with the solvent extraction system (Moulin et al., 1984).

In 2010, Delons et al. registered a patent with many similarities to the process patented by Besson et al., with added claims to the process of recovering pure Hf. Hf-enriched fractions containing as little as 20 molar ppm Zr are reported (Delons et al., 2010).

Ishizuka registered a patent for a process to refine ZrCl\(_4\) containing HfCl\(_4\). The refining was done by repeatedly subliming and condensing Zr(Hf)Cl\(_4\) between a pair of coaxially disposed cylinders, one being at a higher temperature than the other. This process is also referred to as fractional distillation or gradient sublimation. The condensed phase collected at the low temperature zone was dissolved in an alkali metal chloride, an alkaline earth metal chloride or a double salt thereof. Overall separation factors of 10 and 20 were reported and the final ZrCl\(_4\) proved to contain as little as 0.005 % Hf (Ishizuka, 1974).
McLaughlin and Stolz registered a patent in 1988 to separate Zr and Hf tetrachloride with a molten zinc chloride lead chloride solvent, claiming fewer corrosion problems and that the stripping temperature (360 °C to 450 °C) is lower than that of prior Hf-Zr chloride extractive distillation processes (McLaughlin & Stoltz, 1988). In 1989 they registered a patent in which they provide improvements for extractive distillation separation of Zr or Hf, whereby mixtures of fused alkali metal or alkali metal and alkaline earth chlorides are used as the solvent (McLaughlin & Stoltz, 1989).

Energy requirements for a distillation process are comparable to those of a solvent extraction process, since the energy requirement for the higher temperature needed in the distillation process more or less equals the additional energy required for rechlorination, which is required in the MIBK process (Branken, 2009).

Although sublimation purification of ZrF$_4$ is regarded as the most convenient and rapid method, distillation of ZrF$_4$ from a mixture of 70 % ZrF$_4$ and 30 % barium fluoride (BaF$_2$) at 827 °C gives considerably better purification results, especially as regards Fe content. Separation in molten salts or extractive distillation in molten salts is one of the most effective processes currently used for Zr purification (Delons et al., 2010).

**Distillation of fused salts to remove impurities (excluding Hf)**

MacFarlane et al. studied the purification of ZrF$_4$ by distillation of ZrF$_4$-BaF$_2$ melts and reported the method to be superior to the sublimation method. Operation temperatures of up to 875 °C are required to achieve a distillation rate of 15 g·h$^{-1}$. The Fe, Ni and Cu impurities were reduced to a factor of 8 to 10 compared to a factor of 2 obtained through sublimation (MacFarlane et al., 2002).

**2.2.7 High-pressure vapour-liquid distillation**

High-pressure vapour-liquid distillation has also been employed for the separation of Zr and Hf in the tetrachloride form, but these operations require pressures of up to 60 atm which require the use of expensive equipment. Continuous operation is also difficult with regard to the solid feed stream. Furthermore, this process requires stringent temperature control due to the narrow range of the operating temperature which is between the triple point (437 °C) and the critical point (505 °C) (Skaggs et al., 1984).
2.3 Sublimation as a purification and separation process

Sublimation is an endothermic process whereby a solid is directly converted into a gas or vapour (Green, 2000) and desublimation is the process whereby a vapour state is directly converted to the solid state without passing through a liquid state. It is widely employed in purification processes and is used to separate volatile from non-volatile components (Green, 2000; Kodde & Mewes, 1995). For sublimation to occur, the vapour pressure of the subliming components must be greater than its partial pressure in the surrounding gas that is in contact with the solid (Hanson & Corder, 2004). In order to encourage sublimation, the total system needs to be controlled (usually by vacuum), or the partial pressure needs to be reduced (usually by introducing a high-vapour pressure gas) (Raouzeos & Schwenk, 1996).

In order to obtain satisfactory separation and/or purification results, sufficient differences should exist between the vapour pressures of the substances to be separated and if they do not, satisfactory separation may in some instances be unobtainable (Jacque & Dumez, 1960).

Raouzeos and Schwenk specified three types of sublimation process: vacuum sublimation, sublimation with a sweep gas and fractional sublimation (Raouzeos & Schwenk, 1996). Gradient sublimation techniques are also used and are among the most useful and common means of purification. In this technique, separation is achieved in a long tube with a constant temperature gradient so that the target material deposits on the wall of the heated tube, separating it from the more volatile and less non-volatile impurities (Jeon et al., 2008).

Almost no information was available on the sublimation purification of ZrF$_4$ from impurities up to the early 1970s (Solov'ev & Malyutina, 2002a). By the 1990s, sublimation was regarded as the most wide-spread, convenient and rapid method for the purification of ZrF$_4$ (Murskii et al., 1989; Robinson, 1986).

The lower separation factors obtained through sublimation compared to the more efficient distillation process can be explained by the following (Murskii et al., 1989):

- the non-equilibrium nature of the ZrF$_4$ sublimation process
- the interaction of the impurities with the purified substance
- the transfer of impurities as fluidized particles.
2.3.1 Sublimation for the separation of Zr from Hf

The separation of Zr from Hf is mostly studied in the tetrahalide form, mostly fluorides, chlorides and in some instances bromides.

Vacuum sublimation for the separation of Zr and Hf

The separation of Zr and Hf by means of vacuum sublimation consists of multiple sublimation steps in order to achieve the required degree of separation. Monnahela et al. studied vacuum sublimation in a system operated at temperatures of around 550 °C and pressures of 10^-5 mbar. According to the authors, the presence of oxyfluorides resulted in much lower recoveries of product although they found better Hf reduction in samples with higher amounts of oxyfluorides and suggested that this might be due to a “gettering” activity. The formation of oxyfluorides during the manufacture of the ZrF₄ is detrimental to the recovery of the sublimates, but it is a requirement for purification since it can drastically reduce the number of steps required to achieve reactor-grade ZrF₄. Theoretical calculations were based on the percentage recoveries per run and the starting mass required to obtain 2 g of reactor-grade ZrF₄. It was established that, with an average reduction in Hf of 40 % per sublimation step and 80 % recovery, a multi-sublimation process consisting of 10 steps is required. This 10-step process therefore requires a starting mass of 20 g ZrF₄ to produce 2 g of reactor-grade ZrF₄ (Monnahela et al., 2013).

Earlier work by Solov’ev and Malyutina established that the addition of difluorides, especially those of the iron subgroup, act as good sorbents for use in the purification of ZrF₄ from HfF₄ by means of multiple sublimations. It is hypothesized that the HfF₄ forms compounds of lower volatility, thereby increasing the separation between the ZrF₄ and HfF₄. The authors obtained ZrF₄ with an Hf content of 0.05 % with the addition of NiF₂ as a sorbent (or “getter”) with eight sublimation cycles and a degree of sublimation of 60 % to 80 %. Temperatures in the range of 700 °C to 850 °C and pressures of 3 Pa to 5 Pa are required for this purpose (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002b).

It can therefore be assumed that vacuum sublimation requires additional compounds to provide a “gettering” activity in order to reduce the number of steps required to achieve reactor-grade ZrF₄.

Sublimation in an inert atmosphere for the separation of Zr and Hf

Sublimation techniques described in a review done in 1984 on the production of Hf-“free” Zr include thin film sublimation as another technique used to separate ZrCl₄ and HfCl₄ in a counter-current sublimation column. Mechanical transfer of solids down the column was, however, required since
the solids tends to adhere to the column surfaces. The technique of thin film sublimation was used by Gillot and Goldberger in 1968, where sublimated Zr(Hf)Cl$_4$ was passed through a moving bed of glass beads in the presence of an inert gas. Separation was achieved by differential condensation and re-sublimation on the surface of the beads. This method gave some separation of Zr from Hf on a laboratory scale and it was reported that operation on an industrial scale may be less attractive but that the process definitely offers advantages over other conventional processes (Gillot & Goldberger, 1969; Royston & Alfredson, 1970; Skaggs et al., 1984).

### 2.3.2 Sublimation purification of ZrF$_4$ from non-volatile impurities (excluding Hf)

Several sublimation techniques are described in the literature that is being used for the purification of ZrF$_4$ and/or HfF$_4$ from other metal fluoride impurities. Some of these techniques are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The details on the equipment for vacuum sublimation and sublimation in an inert atmosphere are given in Sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.3 and information on the rate of sublimation is given in Section 2.5.

**Vacuum sublimation**

Vacuum sublimation is widely used for the purification of components from other volatile impurities. For the purification of Zr or Hf from metal impurities in the tetrafluoride form, vacuum sublimation is as efficient as sublimation in an inert gas due to the lower operation temperature which increases the separation coefficients. The vacuum heat treatment ensures the removal of volatile impurities from the surface of the tetrafluorides and at a given temperature the rate of sublimation is faster than that of operating in an inert gas (Kotsar et al., 2001).

Vacuum sublimation has the following advantages over sublimation in an inert atmosphere (Kotsar et al., 2001; Raouzeos & Schwenk, 1996):

- Higher efficiency in removing volatile impurities owing to preliminary vacuum heat treatment
- No need for costly materials to sustain high temperatures
- A low partial pressure of the component to be purified is required when sublimating in an inert atmosphere. This suggests high energy consumption due to the repetitive cooling and reheating of the system.

Abate and Wilhelm operated a 2 kg ZrF$_4$ charge vacuum sublimation purification system for ZrF$_4$ from Fe, Ni, Cu and C and found that the optimum temperature for sublimation was 800 °C to 850 °C and
that the optimal pressure was 40 Pa with respect to sublimation rate, purity and total time required for sublimation. They also investigated the influence of the fluoride content in the starting material on the sublimation yield (Abate & Wilhelm, 1951).

Yeatts and Rainey employed single and multi-stage vacuum sublimation purification of ZrF₄ with the use of baffles to reduce the Fe, Ni, O₂ and Cr content on a 50 g commercial ZrF₄ sample at temperatures of 750 °C to 800 °C and a system pressure that was never greater than 53 Pa. They studied the influence of the sublimation rate, condensation rate, number of successive sublimations, number and arrangement of baffles as well as the pre-treatment of the starting material in order to fluorinate the oxides to fluorides. They concluded that the O₂ and Fe levels can be reduced to 500 ppm and 100 ppm respectively without great difficulty. Successive sublimations (three steps) and an increase in the number of baffles from 6 to 10 did not reduce the O₂ any further and they concluded that their procedure had reached its maximum purification level (Yeatts & Rainey, 1965).

Kotsar et al. (2001) studied the purification of ZrF₄ and HfF₄ from metal impurities in a sublimation barrel operating at pressures of 10⁻² to 10⁻⁴ Pa and temperatures as high as 850 °C. They calculated separation coefficients and found them to decrease in the order CrF₂ > MnF₂ > NiF₂ > CoF₂ > MnF₃ > FeF₂ > AlF₃ > CrF₃ > CuF₂ > FeF₃. They also optimized the conditions for vacuum sublimation purification of ZrF₄ and HfF₄ and found that the concentration of impurities increased with the product of the evaporation rate per unit area and the degree of evaporation.

Vacuum sublimation at pressures of 3 Pa to 5 Pa and in the temperature range 700 °C to 850 °C has been used as a purification technique that easily purifies ZrF₄. It has been introduced into industry with excellent economic results. The oxygen contents were reduced to 0.02 % and it was reported that it is impossible to produce ZrF₄ with oxygen levels below 0.1 % (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002a).

**Sublimation in an inert atmosphere**

Purification in an inert atmosphere has also been studied. Dai et al. proposed a new route to purify ZrF₄ to a high purity whereby ZrO(NO₃)₂ replaces the conventional ZrOCl₂ used to purify ZrF₄. In their sublimation experiments, they prepared ZrO(NO₃)₂ using HF to produce ZrF₄·xH₂O, which was sublimed at 900 °C and 200 Pa in an argon atmosphere. The second zone was operated at a temperature of 500 °C to 700 °C with the aim of collecting the sublimed ZrF₄. Impurity levels of Fe in the final ZrF₄ were 20 ppb to 50 ppb and below 5 ppb for Co, Ni and Cu. No mention is made of the oxygen content in the final purified sample (Dai et al., 1992).
MacFarlane et al. sublimated 20 g of ZrF$_4$ in a dry helium atmosphere at temperatures of 850 °C to 875 °C for 1 hour. A maximum yield of 50 % was obtained after only 3 hours and the Fe, Ni and Cu impurities were reduced by a factor of only 2 (MacFarlane et al., 2002).

Robinson investigated the purification of heavy metal fluoride glass and studied both the sublimation and the distillation of ZrF$_4$-BaF$_2$ melts. Results indicated that one sublimation step under dry HF atmosphere reduced the Fe content by a factor of 10 with a 70 % yield (Robinson, 1986). It was mentioned that the limiting value of Fe cannot be reduced to below 1 ppm to 2 ppm, even after several successive iterations.

Sublimation of ZrF$_4$ in a chlorine flow was also investigated for purification from metal impurities. Sublimation was carried out on a 50 g sample at 800 °C and the cold zone for product collection was kept between 690 °C and 710 °C. Results indicated that sublimation in chlorine gave a product with lower Cu, Al and Fe impurities compared with sublimation in a helium atmosphere (Murskii et al., 1989).

**Purification starting from the impure metal and involving sublimation**

Other purification techniques for the purification of ZrF$_4$ from metal impurities have been studied that do not use ZrF$_4$ as a starting material, but rather obtain high-purity ZrF$_4$ from an impure metal or other starting material. Folweiler invented a chemical vapour purification process for preparing high-purity metal fluorides. The process involves the reaction of a metal (in excess) with a reactive transport agent to generate a gaseous metal-containing compound. Isolation and fluorination of the gaseous metal-containing compound follow, thereby forming a solid metal fluoride (Folweiler, 1987).

Fujiura et al. used a technique of chemical vapour deposition in ZrBr$_4$-HF, in which Zr metal is reacted with Br$_2$ to produce ZrBr$_4$ and is then fluorinated with HF in an argon atmosphere to produce ZrF$_4$ of the required purity. This technique is more efficient than the normal sublimation purification and/or solvent extraction processes for the removal of transition metal impurities, since the vapour pressure of ZrBr$_4$ is ten orders of magnitude higher than the vapour pressures of the transition metal bromides at a temperature of 350 °C. Impurity levels indicated Fe contents in ZrF$_4$ of less than 10 ppb (Fujiura et al., 1989).

Withers et al. registered a patent for a process to produce ZrF$_4$, HfF$_4$ and AlF$_3$ of high purity. The process involved incomplete reaction of the metal or metal compound (preferably its oxide, i.e. ZrO$_2$) with elemental fluorine, followed by high-temperature sublimation of the metal fluoride. It is
suggested that the unreacted metal or metal compound act as a getter with the aim of converting volatile impurities to non-volatile metals or metal compounds. The “gettering” activity thereby acts to selectively sublime the required metal fluoride for recovery from the reaction product. A heating rate of 1 °C-min⁻¹ up to 850 °C at 12.5 kPa was reported as the preferred condition for the operation, with an overall ZrF₄ yield of 91 % from the starting ZrO₂. In order to maximize the “getter” activity, i.e. to improve purity, lower conversion of oxide to fluorides is preferred (Withers et al., 1991).

Other purification techniques that involve sublimation

Purification techniques combined with a sublimation process are also reported in the literature. Such techniques are necessary, since sublimation and/or distillation techniques for the removal of Fe have proven to be very difficult due to the high vapour pressure of Fe³⁺, to name but one drawback. A combined vaporisation-electrolytic separation procedure used in the preparation of pure ZrF₄ and HfF₄ was patented by Pastor and Robinson, who disclosed an efficient single-step process to reduce Fe impurities below 1 ppm (Pastor & Robinson, 1986).

2.4 Apparatus used for sublimation purification of ZrF₄

Some of the sublimation equipment illustrated in the literature for the purification of ZrF₄ is discussed in the following sections. Other apparatus used for sublimation, but not in particular for purification of ZrF₄, is also given in the literature (Gosling & Bowen, 1973; Jang et al., 2005; Jeon et al., 2008; Kawato et al., 2014).

2.4.1 Vacuum sublimation purification (excluding Hf)

The sublimation unit used by Abate and Wilhelm for the sublimation purification of ZrF₄ is shown in Figure 2-2 (Abate & Wilhelm, 1951). The impure ZrF₄ was added in the bottom of the retort and heated to the required temperature. Baffle plates were incorporated to help reduce the mechanical carrying of impurities. The purified ZrF₄ was collected on a condenser. Here (G) is the nickel-lined retort, 5 inches in diameter and 31 inches high, (H) nickel sheet, (I) rubber gasket, (J) copper cooling coils, (K) removable top, (L) cooling coils, (M) 2-inch condenser, (N) thermocouple well, (O) vacuum outlet, (P) charge, (Q) baffles and (R) sublimed ZrF₄.
The sublimation system used by Yeatts and Rainey (Figure 2-3) is similar to that of Abate and Wilhelm. It consists of a 3-inch nickel pipe, with the impure ZrF$_4$ loaded into the bottom part of the pipe and covered with a loosely fitting top with nickel sheet baffles and an aperture at the top. Above this section is a hair-pin type water-cooled ¼-inch nickel tube that serves as the condenser (Yeatts & Rainey, 1965).

Kotsar et al. used a metallic nickel sublimer able to take a charge weight of 1 kg to 3 kg. It consists of an evaporating barrel 8.5 cm in diameter, a filter, a vapour delivery line and a condenser (Figure 2-4). The heated zone consists of two temperature zones: the sublimation zone kept at temperatures of 700 °C to 850 °C and the upper zone kept at temperatures of 458 °C to 600 °C. The internal parts of the equipment are labelled as follows: (1) mounting, (2) heater, (3) evaporating barrel, (4) material to be sublimed, (5) shields, (6) thermocouples, (7) filter, (8) current leads, (9) condenser, (10) sublimed ZrF$_4$, (11) lid and (12) vacuum chamber (Kotsar et al., 2001).
It is evident from the literature that several authors use a particular setup for vacuum sublimation, as reported in the work done by Abate and Wilhelm, Yeatts et al. and Kotsar et al. The principle is the same in each case, i.e. the use of a vertical sublimer with added baffles to reduce impurities entrained in the sublimated product and a condenser just above the baffles for collection of the purified product. The authors merely made changes to the operating temperatures, pressures and size of equipment. These setups were, however, only used for the purification of ZrF$_4$ and not for the removal of Hf.

2.4.2 Vacuum sublimation purification (separation of Zr and Hf)

Setups similar to those discussed above have also been used for the separation of Zr and Hf. Monnahela et al. used a similar setup (Figure 2-5) for multistage sublimation to purify ZrF$_4$ by reducing Hf levels to below 100 ppm, but without the use of baffles (Monnahela et al., 2013).
Solov’ev and Malyutina used a somewhat different experimental setup (Figure 2-6) in kinetic studies for the sublimation of ZrF$_4$. The equipment is labelled as follows: (1) current supply, (2) cover, (3) casing, (4) desublimer, (5) trays with purified material and (6) electric heater (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002a).

Figure 2-6: Vacuum sublimation apparatus (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002a)
Solov’ev and Malyutina also studied the separation of Zr and Hf in a vacuum with the addition of NiF₂, but no mention was made of the equipment that was used (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002b).

2.4.3 Sublimation purification in an inert atmosphere (excluding Hf)

Dai et al. purified ZrF₄ from impurities in a resistance furnace (Figure 2-7) operating at high temperature and in an argon atmosphere of 200 Pa. The furnace is divided into two zones: the first zone was for the sublimation of the ZrF₄ along with the volatile impurities at temperatures exceeding 800 °C and the second zone was for the desublimation of the ZrF₄ at a lower temperature of between 500 °C and 700 °C, thereby separating the ZrF₄ from the volatile impurities (Dai et al., 1992).

Fujiura et al. prepared ZrBr₄ by reacting Zr metal with Br₂ (Figure 2-8). The ZrBr₄ was carried to the reaction zone (7) where it was reacted with HF in an argon atmosphere. The resulting purified ZrF₄ product was collected in the deposition zone (8). Other labels include: (1) electric furnace, (2) electric furnace, (3) Pt tube, (4) Pt. sheet, (5) Zr metal, (6) Pt. tube, (7) reaction zone, (8) deposition zone and (9) thermocouple (Fujiura et al., 1989).
It seems as if the equipment used for sublimation in an inert atmosphere is for all practical purposes identical, as seen in the work done by Dai et al. and Fujiura et al. (Dai et al., 1992; Fujiura et al., 1989).

MacFarlane et al. used a setup (Figure 2-9) similar to that used in vacuum sublimation, where the apparatus consists of a lower crucible to sublime the ZrF₄ and an upper crucible for desublimation. The crucible was made of vitreous carbon heated by an induction heater. A single coil of the induction heater was positioned so as to heat the lower crucible, thereby establishing a temperature gradient across the upper crucible that is substantially lower than the temperature in the lower crucible. The authors make no mention of the temperature of the top crucible (MacFarlane et al., 2002).

![Figure 2-9: Sublimation setup used for the purification of ZrF₄](image)

Other techniques for sublimation purification (not specifically of ZrF₄) are also discussed. Jeon et al. describe equipment for general sublimation purification using baffles with orifices. The apparatus (Figure 2-10) consists of a long tube with two heaters, one for sublimation and another for desublimation, thereby achieving separation of impurities that are both more and less volatile than the required component. Baffles with orifices are introduced and it is claimed that this addition results in an increase in the effective yield as well as a higher purity (Jeon et al., 2010).
2.5 Typical sublimation rates of ZrF₄ and HfF₄

Typical sublimation rates for ZrF₄ and/or HfF₄ listed in the literature are discussed below.

2.5.1 Vacuum sublimation

Abate and Wilhelm investigated the purification of ZrF₄ by means of vacuum sublimation and found sublimation rates of 480 g·h⁻¹, 650 g·h⁻¹ and 954 g·h⁻¹ at temperatures of 750 °C, 800 °C and 900 °C respectively (Abate & Wilhelm, 1951). The area available for sublimation was approximately 127 cm² and the sublimer could accept a 2 kg charge of ZrF₄. The total time required to sublime the entire 2 kg of ZrF₄ at 750 °C and 900 °C was found to be 360 minutes and 150 minutes respectively.

Kotsar et al. purified ZrF₄ and HfF₄ and obtained the product of the sublimation rate and degree of sublimation for ZrF₄. Values of 0.5 g·cm⁻²·h⁻¹ to 0.9 g·cm⁻²·h⁻¹ ZrF₄ in the temperature range 700 °C to 750 °C were obtained for ZrF₄. The pressures reported were in the range of 10⁻² Pa to 10⁻⁴ Pa (Kotsar et al., 2001). The maximum bed height according to Figure 2-4 is approximately 37 cm, with a sublimation area of approximately 56.7 cm².

Yeatts and Rainey reported, in accordance with the literature data, that a sublimation rate of 1 g·h⁻¹ to 10 g·h⁻¹ (which they considered a reasonable rate) could be produced at temperatures in the range of 700 °C to 800 °C. Their work revealed a sublimation rate of 4 g·h⁻¹ at 750 °C to 800 °C with approximately 46 cm² available as a sublimation area and a system pressure never greater than 53 Pa. They also found that the sublimation rate depended more on the size of the aperture between the top and the boat than on the temperature, which might explain the low sublimation rates that resulted from their work. See Section 2.4.1 for more detail on the equipment used (Yeatts & Rainey, 1965).
In a study to investigate the dependence of the sublimation rate on the process pressure at laboratory scale, the authors used a three-section vacuum setup which consisted of evaporation, condensation and cooling zones. The sublimer could take a 10 g charge and had a sublimation area of approximately 10 cm$^2$. Experiments were done on both industrial ZrF$_4$ and pure ZrF$_4$ obtained from the double sublimation of the industrial sample (Ti et al., 1990a). Sublimation rates were calculated per unit surface area in the temperature range of 650 °C to 850 °C and in the pressure range of 13.3 Pa up to 13 360 Pa.

**Sublimation rate of ZrF$_4$**

*Effect of temperature under vacuum*

Table 2-1 gives a summary of the above discussion (Section 2.5.1) of the sublimation rates as well as the sublimation conditions obtained for ZrF$_4$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Pressure [Pa]</th>
<th>Temperature [°C]</th>
<th>Sublimation rate [g·h$^{-1}$]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>1327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Yeatts &amp; Rainey, 1965)</td>
<td>&lt; 53</td>
<td>750-800 (775)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kotsar et al., 2001)</td>
<td>$10^{-2}$ to $10^{-4}$</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kotsar et al., 2001)</td>
<td>$10^{-2}$ to $10^{-4}$</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ti et al., 1990a)</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ti et al., 1990a)</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The dependence of the sublimation rate on temperature from literature sources (Table 2-1) is presented in Figure 2-11. A linear line was fitted through the respective data points and it seems as though the sublimation rate has a linear dependence on the temperature in the temperature range investigated. Deviations might be due to surface area, heat transfer sample purity, pressure or other factors.
Ti et al. stated that sublimation under vacuum conditions is a pure surface phenomenon (Ti et al., 1990b). The area-dependent sublimation rates were calculated based on the available information in the respective literature sources. The information is illustrated in Table 2-2. (Abate & Wilhelm, 1951; Yeatts & Rainey, 1965; Kotsar et al., 2001; Ti et al., 1990a).

Table 2-2: Area-dependent sublimation rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Area [cm²]</th>
<th>Temperature [°C]</th>
<th>Area-dependent sublimation rate [g·cm⁻²·h⁻¹]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>127.2</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>127.2</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>6.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>127.2</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>7.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Abate &amp; Wilhelm, 1951)</td>
<td>127.2</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>10.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Yeatts &amp; Rainey, 1965)</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>750-800 (775)</td>
<td>0.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kotsar et al., 2001)</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kotsar et al., 2001)</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ti et al., 1990a)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ti et al., 1990a)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The area-dependent sublimation rates as a function of the temperature (as calculated from literature sources) are shown in Figure 2-12.
The $R^2$ value of 0.59 is relatively low and additional dependencies of the sublimation rate need to be investigated (e.g. heat transfer and pressure).

A study was made of the dependence of vacuum sublimation rates on the process temperature by using pure ZrF$_4$ (a product obtained from the double vacuum sublimation of industrial ZrF$_4$). A correlation which relates the sublimation rate (g·cm$^{-2}$·min$^{-1}$) to the temperature (K), i.e. the well-known Langmuir equation, is reported (Tiet et al., 1990b):

$$\log W = 5.293 - \frac{6565}{T} \quad (1)$$

Where $W$ is the sublimation rate in g·cm$^{-2}$·min$^{-1}$ and $T$ is the temperature in K. A linear relationship with an $R^2$ value greater than 0.99 was obtained for the pure ZrF$_4$. A logarithmic plot of the area-dependent sublimation rates (under vacuum conditions) obtained from Table 2-2 (impure ZrF$_4$) is presented as a function of the inverse temperature in Figure 2-13.
From the trend line equation obtained in Figure 2-13 it is evident that the values of A and B nearly correspond to those in Equation 1 obtained by the work of Ti et al. (Ti et al., 1990c) on pure ZrF$_4$. The $R^2$ value of 0.56 may be attributable to several other factors (e.g. the effect of sample purity, pressure and heat transfer).

**Effect of pressure**

Since the Langmuir equation only holds under deep vacuum conditions, it is necessary to investigate the effect of pressure on the sublimation rate at low vacuum conditions. Ti et al. studied the effect of an increase in pressure on the vacuum sublimation rate and found a gradual decline in the sublimation rate (Ti et al., 1990a). The effect of pressure on the sublimation rate at low vacuum pressure can be described by the correlation in Equation 2 (Ti et al., 1990a):

$$y = a - b \cdot x^n$$

(2)

where $y$ and $x$ are the sublimation rate and pressure and $a$, $b$ and $n$ are constants. More data are required in order to obtain the pressure dependency of the data in Table 2-2 as presented in Equation 2. Furthermore, no indication was given as to whether the pressures reported in Table 2-1 are absolute or gauge pressures. Therefore no correction could be made for the dependency on pressure of the sublimation rate.

**Effect of product composition**

Due to the significant differences of the vapour pressures of ZrF$_4$ compared to those of the metal fluoride impurities in the ZrF$_4$, it is often concluded that the impurities will remain in the residue after sublimation. Yeatts & Rainey stated that the difference in the sublimation rate does not indicate a significant effect upon the impurity levels of the elements investigated (Yeatts & Rainey, 1965).

With that said, Ti et al. found that pure ZrF$_4$ has a higher sublimation rate than industrial ZrF$_4$ which contains a certain degree of impurities. They concluded that this phenomenon might be due to the accumulation of low-volatile components in the near-surface layer of the sample, making diffusion and evaporation increasingly difficult, which results in a decreased sublimation intensity. At a specific temperature, the sublimation rate of pure ZrF$_4$ was found to be 20% to 50% higher than that of industrial ZrF$_4$, which contains a certain degree of impurities (Ti et al., 1990c, 1990a).
**Effect of layer height**

In a study of the influence of layer height on the vacuum sublimation rate of ZrF$_4$, Ti et al. concluded that the sublimation rate does not necessarily depend on the height of the sample. The authors further concluded that the sublimation of ZrF$_4$ becomes increasingly difficult due to diffusion of the sublimated ZrF$_4$ through the layer of non-volatile impurities (Ti et al., 1990b).

**Effect of particle size**

The sublimation efficiency of zinc particles indicated that a decrease in particle size does not necessarily indicate an increase in the sublimation efficiency. The authors of this study mentioned that sublimation becomes increasingly difficult with smaller particles due to sintering problems, which lead to a decrease in the number of molecules able to vaporize from the surface (Zhan et al., 2009).

It is, however, expected that samples with greater surface areas, i.e. smaller particles, may sublime at different rates to those of larger particles with a smaller surface area. No information was found on the effect of particle size on the sublimation efficiency of ZrF$_4$ and/or HfF$_4$.

**Other effects that may influence the sublimation rate**

ZrF$_4$ has several crystal structures, which may have a drastic effect on its sublimation rate.

ZrF$_4$ is also quite hygroscopic and several forms of zirconium oxyfluorides may exist together. The presence of oxyfluorides may have a drastic effect on the efficiency and yield of sublimation and these needs to be investigated. The porosity of the particles may also play a significant role in the sublimation rate.

**Sublimation rate of HfF$_4$**

A 1 400 g HfF$_4$ sample was sublimed in a sublimer similar to the one shown in Figure 2-2. The authors reported that 10 hours was sufficient for complete sublimation of the HfF$_4$ at 675 °C at approximately 1.3 Pa (Williams et al., 1956). This amounts to approximately 140 g·h$^{-1}$. No indication was given of the sublimation area.

Kotsar et al. determined the sublimation rates of HfF$_4$ in the sublimer shown in Figure 2-4 and obtained values of 0.3 g·cm$^{-2}$·h$^{-1}$ and 0.6 g·cm$^{-2}$·h$^{-1}$ at 700 °C and 770 °C respectively (Kotsar et al., 2001). The sublimation area was approximately 56.7 cm$^2$, which amounts to 17 g·h$^{-1}$ at 700 °C.
2.5.2 Sublimation in an inert atmosphere

In the apparatus used by MacFarlane et al. (Figure 2-9), a 50 % yield was obtained when a 20 g sample was sublimed for 1 hour in the lower crucible with a volume of 67 ml and at temperatures of 850 °C to 875 °C. The same yield was obtained in a scaled-up system with a lower crucible volume of 116 ml with samples of as much as 100 g which were sublimed for 3 hours. Taking the yield into account, the sublimation rates obtained in the two crucibles were 10 g∙h⁻¹ and 10.7 g∙h⁻¹ respectively (MacFarlane et al., 2002).

The bottom crucible dimensions are required in order to obtain a surface-dependent rate. The following were assumed in order to estimate the dimensions of the bottom crucible:

- The ZrF₄ load of 116 ml equals the volume of the bottom crucible
- The diameter of the top section of the crucible is assumed equal to the height of the crucible
- The crucible volume was divided into a cylinder (top section) and half a sphere (bottom part), of which the total volume should amount to 116 ml (Figure 2-14).

The value of the radius corresponding to a volume of 116 ml equals 0.028 m³ and corresponds to an area-dependent rate of 1.87 g·m⁻²·s⁻¹ at 850 °C to 875 °C.

![Figure 2-14: Approximate dimensions of the crucible used by MacFarlane (Figure 2-9)](image)

This value can be compared to the area-dependent rate obtained from the sublimation rate model at the same temperature. It must be noted that the total time of 3 hours could be more than the actual time taken for complete sublimation of the 50 g sample. Furthermore, an explanation for the yield of only 50 % could be the presence of oxyfluorides in the sample.

2.5.3 Scaled-up sublimation processes

Typical sublimation capacities for scaled-up systems (not specifically for ZrF₄ sublimation) are 5 kg·m⁻²·h⁻¹ to 20 kg·m⁻²·h⁻¹ and desublimation capacities of 10 kg·m⁻²·h⁻¹ to 40 kg·m⁻²·h⁻¹ (Raouzeos & Schwenk, 1996).
Solov’ev and Malyutina stated that the technology of vacuum sublimation demonstrated positive results when evaluated on pilot plant equipment and that this technology has been introduced into industrial practices for producing reactor-purity Zr, but made no mention of the feasibility and economic viability of the process (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002a).

2.6 Nuclear specification for Zr

Table 2-3 lists the ASTM composition specifications for Zr sponge (Benedict et al., 1981), ASTM grade R6001 and ASTM specification B349-73.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Permissible impurities in Zr sponge max, ppm</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Permissible impurities in Zr sponge max, ppm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aluminium</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>1 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boron</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>Manganese</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadmium</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>Nickel</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Nitrogen</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chlorine</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>Oxygen</td>
<td>1 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chromium</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Silicon</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobalt</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Titanium</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copper</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Tungsten</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hafnium</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Uranium (total)</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mass fractions of permissible impurities in ZrF₄ were obtained by assuming that all tetrafluorides are in their highest oxidation state. These are listed in (Table 2-4).
Table 2-4: Permissible impurities in ZrF₄

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Permissible impurities in ZrF₄ max, ppm</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Permissible impurities in ZrF₄ max, ppm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aluminium</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boron</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>Manganese</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadmium</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>Nickel</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>Nitrogen</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chlorine</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>Oxygen</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chromium</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Silicon</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobalt</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Titanium</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copper</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Tungsten</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hafnium</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Uranium (total)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It would be a favourable outcome of this study if the final product adhered to the above specifications for ZrF₄, especially in the case of Hf.

Influences of some elements:

- A high nickel content in the alloys promotes the absorption of hydrogen, leading to reduction in ductility (Benedict et al., 1981)
- A higher niobium content results in better mechanical properties (Benedict et al., 1981)
- Uranium and thorium form fission products if present in Zr cladding (Benedict et al., 1981)
Chapter 3: Experimental

3.1 Process description and concept discussion

The BFD for the sublimation system is shown in Figure 3-1. A pre-weighed amount of Zr(Hf)F$_4$ was placed in a sublimer and exposed to elevated temperatures for a set amount of time. The sublimed mass diffuses into a stream of nitrogen gas which is pre-heated and used as sweep gas during the sublimation of Zr(Hf)F$_4$. The gas then flows across a water-cooled desublimer annulus section so as to desuble the Zr(Hf)F$_4$ across the length of the desublimer. The remainder of the gas is then passed to a water scrubber.

![Figure 3-1: Block flow diagram (BFD) for the sublimation separation of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$](image)

The idea is to sublime a mass of Zr(Hf)F$_4$ at a pre-determined temperature for a pre-determined time and to stop sublimation after the time has elapsed. The sublimer residue as well as the desublimed mass are collected, weighed and analysed for Zr and Hf content. The ratio of Zr and Hf that remains in the sublimer as well as the ratio of Zr and Hf that desublimed over the length of the desublimer are determined. The aim was to establish the extent of separation within the sublimer and desublimer to achieve nuclear grade purity.

The nitrogen feed is controlled with a rotameter at a set regulated pressure. The rotameter was calibrated with the use of a bubble flow meter.

The sublimer is a reactor boat (Figure 3-2) 100 mm long and 20 mm deep which can take a maximum of 80 g Zr(Hf)F$_4$. The Zr(Hf)F$_4$ to be sublimed is placed in the boat which is placed in the tube furnace.
The desublimer is a long cylindrical pipe (cooled to ~ 30 °C) inside another insulated pipe which facilitates the carrying of the gas mixture. A simple geometry was selected for the desublimer to facilitate easy removal of the components at the end of the experiment. The desublimer temperature was much lower than the temperature of the outer pipe, the objective of which was not to desublime on the outer pipe which facilitates the hot gas. The spacing between the two pipes is minimal so as to reduce the diffusion path of the condensing particles.

Figure 3-3 gives a schematic of the sublimer and desublimer inside the tube furnace. The section above the sublimation pan facilitates the nitrogen gas, which reduces the partial pressure of the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ and carries the tetrafluorides to the desublimer space.

The experimental setup for the sublimation/desublimation system is shown in Figure 3-4 and Figure 3-5.
Figure 3-4: Experimental setup for the sublimation/desublimation separation of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$

Figure 3-5: Illustration of the sublimation/desublimation setup

Figure 3-5 shows a gas diversion section which diverts the gas to a water scrubber which scrubs any desublimed Zr(Hf)F$_4$ entrained in the gas stream.

There is a difference between the temperature of the elements and the inside temperature of the furnace. The extent of the temperature difference depends on the nitrogen flow setting and the set temperature. Typical temperature differences range between 20 °C and 50 °C.

The sublimer is added to the oven once the required sublimation temperature has been reached. Figure 3-6 shows an image of the sublimer and desublimer inside the tube furnace at a set temperature of 850 °C.
Figure 3-6: Image showing sublimer and desublimer in tube oven set at 850 °C.

The piping and instrumentation diagram of the system is shown in Figure 3-7.

3.2 Experimental procedure

Sublimation occurs as long as the vapour pressure is greater than the partial pressure in the bulk gas stream (Hanson & Corder, 2004). The use of a sweep gas constantly reduces the partial pressure and a higher sublimation rate will therefore result. In this work nitrogen was used as the sweep gas.

Two types of experiment were done. The tube oven was heated to the set temperature before sample loading. The first set of experiments was done to determine the rate of sublimation. Several sublimers containing 15 g sample mass were loaded one after the other into the tube furnace for different time intervals. The weight losses (mass sublimed) as well as the Zr/Hf mole ratios were determined for the sublimer residue. No desublimer was used for the determination of the rate of sublimation.

In the second set of experiments three sublimers containing 15 g ZrF$_4$ each were loaded into the tube furnace one after the other for 30 min. The idea here was to desublime as much as possible over the length of the desublimer to determine the Zr/Hf mole ratio as a function of the desublimer length. It was assumed that the sublimation conditions were the same for all the sublimer samples.
Figure 3-7: Piping and instrumentation diagram
Step-by-step procedure

1. Assemble the system.
2. If required, add the desublimer to the system.
3. Set the furnace to the required temperature.
4. Set the nitrogen flow to the required setting.
5. Weigh the correct amount of Zr(Hf)F$_4$ and place it in the sublimer pan.
6. Place the sublimer in the furnace once it has reached the required temperature.
7. Keep a constant flow of nitrogen during the sublimation experiment.
8. Keep the system at the set temperature for a predetermined time, i.e. 15 minutes, 30 minutes and 45 minutes.
9. Once the time has elapsed, open the system and remove the sublimer while it is hot, place a lid on the sublimer and allow to cool.
10. Repeat steps 5 to 9 for the next experiment.
11. Once all the experiments at one temperature have been completed, switch off the furnace and allow it to cool completely.
12. If applicable, carefully remove the desublimer from the oven and take samples at different lengths of the desublimer.
13. Prepare samples for analysis.
14. Repeat for different temperatures.

The sublimation rate of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ are strongly dependent on the vapour pressures and the mole fractions of the respective components in the bulk mixture and therefore the sublimation rate of the ZrF$_4$ is much higher than that of the HfF$_4$. The sublimed mass then enters a desublimation zone in which the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ desublime at different rates. This implies that separation is achieved in both the sublimer and the desublimer.

The ultimate goal is to be able to provide experimental conditions, i.e. sublimation time, temperature and position on the desublimer which provide the best separation conditions. These conditions must, however, be in balance with the operation cost, as the cost will be higher at a higher temperature and for longer sublimation runs.

It is imperative to find the optimal temperature. Higher temperatures cause a lower degree of separation from impurities and lower temperatures increase the sublimation time drastically (Abate & Wilhelm, 1951; Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002a).
It will be noted from the results discussed in the following sections that separation was achieved in both the sublimer and the desublimer.

**Equipment used**

The tube furnace was a Carbolyte Eurotherm, Type GHA 12/300 SR 20-802734, with a maximum temperature of 1200 °C.
Chapter 4: Preparation and characterisation of Zr(Hf)F₄

4.1 Preparation of Zr(Hf)F₄

Zircon (Zr(Hf)SiO₄) is plasma treated at temperatures above 1 700 °C in order to dissociate the silicon from the zircon to produce plasma-dissociated zircon (PDZ or Zr(Hf)O₂·SiO₂).

\[
\text{Zr(Hf)SiO}_4 \xrightarrow{\text{Plasma}} \text{Zr(Hf)O}_2 \cdot \text{SiO}_2 \quad (3)
\]

The PDZ was then treated with HF in a fluidized bed at 110 °C to remove the silica from the matrix producing SiF₄ and H₂O as gaseous by-products and a bed of Zr(Hf)O₂ (DPDZ).

\[
\text{Zr(Hf)O}_2 \cdot \text{SiO}_2 + \text{HF(g)} \xrightarrow{\text{Fluidized bed}} \text{Zr(Hf)O}_2 + \text{SiF}_4 \uparrow \quad (4)
\]

The DPDZ was then reacted with ammonium bifluoride (ABF, i.e. NH₄F·HF) bought in bulk from Minema Chemicals.

The DPDZ was pre-mixed with the ABF and introduced into the reactor (batch). The reaction mechanism to produce Zr(Hf)F₄ involved separate steps: the first step was the formation of the ammonium fluoride intermediate, i.e. \((\text{NH}_4)_3\text{Zr(Hf)F}_7\) at approximately 150 °C, while the remaining steps involved the decomposition of the intermediate, essentially decomposition of the \((\text{NH}_4)_3\text{Zr(Hf)F}_7\), to yield Zr(Hf)F₄, which ranged from temperatures of 200 °C to 410 °C, depending on the pressure (Haendler, Wheeler & Robinson, 1951).

\[
\text{Zr(Hf)O}_2 + 4\text{NH}_4\text{F·HF} \rightarrow (\text{NH}_4)_3\text{Zr(Hf)F}_7 + \text{NH}_4\text{F} + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} \uparrow \quad (5)
\]

\[
(\text{NH}_4)_3\text{Zr(Hf)F}_7 \rightarrow (\text{NH}_4)_2\text{Zr(Hf)F}_6 + \text{NH}_4\text{F} \uparrow \quad (6)
\]

\[
(\text{NH}_4)_2\text{Zr(Hf)F}_6 \rightarrow \text{NH}_4\text{Zr(Hf)F}_5 + \text{NH}_4\text{F} \uparrow \quad (7)
\]

\[
\text{NH}_4\text{Zr(Hf)F}_5 \rightarrow \text{Zr(Hf)F}_4 + \text{NH}_4\text{F} \uparrow \quad (8)
\]

Sufficient detention times were required for each step to proceed to completion. It was found that approximately 90 minutes were required for the intermediates to form at a temperature of
approximately 150 °C and another 90 minutes above 400 °C were required for complete decomposition of the intermediates to Zr(Hf)F$_4$.

The same mechanism is assumed for the other metal oxide impurities contained in the DPDZ. The product therefore still contains HfF$_4$ along with other metal fluoride impurities, unreacted DPDZ and zircon. The formation of oxyfluorides and hydrides is very probable; therefore the entire fluorination process must be carried out in a leak-tight system to avoid contact with air and moisture.

### 4.1.1 Impurities in ZrF$_4$

The impurities in the ZrF$_4$ are mostly carried over from the impurities in the PDZ. The metal oxides present in the zircon (Namakwa Sands Zircon) before plasma treatment include ZrO$_2$, HfO$_2$, SiO$_2$, Fe$_2$O$_3$, TiO$_2$, Al$_2$O$_3$, Cr$_2$O$_3$, CaO, P$_2$O$_5$ and U and Th.

### 4.1.2 System description

The reactor was a 6” stainless steel pipe equipped with flanges on the left for reagent addition. The flanges were equipped with a nitrogen inlet and a thermocouple fitting to measure the temperature of the reaction mixture to ensure that the temperatures were adequate for melting of the ABF but did not exceed the decomposition temperatures of the ABF. It was further necessary to exceed a temperature of 400 °C for decomposition of the (NH$_4$)$_3$Zr(Hf)F$_7$ but not to exceed 500 °C, at which point sublimation of the Zr(Hf)F$_4$ starts to become more evident.

The cold finger was a water-cooled copper coil inside a 6” stainless steel pipe. The off-gases from the reaction are carried with the nitrogen stream to the cold finger where they are desublimed and collected on the copper coil. The gases exiting the cold finger should consist only of nitrogen and are passed to the outside scrubbing system, which consisted of a 1 % HF scrubber, an 18 % KOH scrubber and a fan which provided a vacuum of approximately -8 kPa.

The product remained in the reactor along with the unreacted DPDZ, PDZ and zircon. After removal, the product should be homogenized in an inert atmosphere for analysis. The piping and instrumentation diagram (P&ID) for the sublimation system is shown in Figure 4-1.

Should a blockage occur, the maximum partial pressure of the ABF in the nitrogen will not exceed 110 kPa (abs). The nitrogen supply line is regulated at 45 kPa (g), implying a total pressure of
45 kPa (g), which is 10% lower than the total allowable pressure for the reactor not to be qualified as a pressure vessel. The partial pressure of the nitrogen in case of a blockage is then 22 kPa (g).

A pressure transmitter was also installed to monitor the pressure at the inlet of the nitrogen pre-heater. The transmitter was linked to the heaters to stop it from heating once the pressure reached 45 kPa (g). See interlock PH-I-01 on P&ID in Figure 4-1.

Thermal cut-outs were installed on the heater to prevent temperature run-away. See interlock TH-I-02 on P&ID in Figure 4-1.

From this it is evident that there are no statutory regulations applicable to the equipment used for the sublimation separation of Zr and Hf.

Mechanical engineering approval was obtained for the system and can be found in document AC-AMI01-ENN-16002.
Safety: Heaters to be switched off in case of:
- If pressure exceeds 45 kPa (g)
- Heater temperature run-away > 1000 °C

Figure 4-1: Batch reactor system for the production of Zr(Hf)F$_4$ from DPDZ and ABF
4.2 Characterisation of Zr(Hf)F₄ used in sublimation experiments

4.2.1 X-Ray diffraction

Identification of the ZrF₄ was done by means of X-Ray diffraction analysis to indicate the major components and to determine whether oxyfluorides and/or ammonium zirconium fluorides are present.

An XRD spectrum for Zr(Hf)F₄ product manufactured from DPDZ and ABF is shown in Figure 4-2, indicating that the major component present in the sample is ZrF₄.

![XRD pattern of Zr(Hf)F₄ overlaid with stick pattern of ZrF₄](image)

**Figure 4-2: XRD pattern of Zr(Hf)F₄ overlaid with stick pattern of ZrF₄**

Table 4-1 shows the quantitative XRD results obtained for three batches of Zr(Hf)F₄ prepared from DPDZ and ABF (run a, b and c).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Batch number</th>
<th>Weight % of respective components in samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zr(Hf)F₄·H₂O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run a</td>
<td>9.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run b</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run c</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-1: Quantitative XRD results for three batches Zr(Hf)F₄ prepared from DPDZ and ABF
The above results imply that there is a certain percentage of crystal water and NH$_4$F in the sample that will come off during heating of the samples. Table 4-2 lists the amounts of water and NH$_4$F in each batch.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Batch number</th>
<th>Weight % of low-temperature volatiles (LTV)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>H$_2$O from Zr(Hf)F$_4$·H$_2$O</td>
<td>NH$_4$F from NH$_4$Zr(Hf)F$_5$</td>
<td>Total LTV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run a</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run b</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run c</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above results it is evident that the three batches contain approximately 8 % low-temperature volatiles.

### 4.2.2 Thermogravimetric analysis

Samples from the three batches were heated in a TGA from ambient temperature to 850 °C at a heating rate of 10 °C·min$^{-1}$. The TGA indicated the following:

- Amount of non-volatiles in the batch (i.e. total water and NH$_4$F or other species detected by XRD). This gives an indication of the extent of the decomposition reaction (reactions (5) to (8))
- The mass remaining at 850 °C is an indication of the quantity of zircon, oxyfluorides and unconverted oxides.

The TGA results of three batches Zr(Hf)F$_4$ of product prepared for the sublimation experiments are shown in Figure 4-3.
The following observations were made:

- Runs a and b showed good repetition, with an 8% decrease in the mass which is indicative of the presence of Zr(Hf)F$_4$·H$_2$O and/or (NH$_4$)ZrF$_5$. This corresponds well to the results of the XRD analysis discussed in Section 3.3.2.

- Run c showed a mass decrease of 15.5% prior to the sublimation temperature of 600 °C. Only 8.5% low-temperature volatiles were detected by XRD and no explanation could be found as to what the content of the remaining 7% could be. This batch was not used for sublimation experiments.

- The TGA for runs b and c indicates that approximately 6% of the sample remains at a temperature of 850 °C. This corresponds to the approximate amount of zircon originally in the sample (6.7%).

- The results obtained for “run a” indicates a residue of 13.4% at 850 °C. This may imply that the conversion of the DPDZ was not successful. This does not, however, influence the results for the sublimation of the Zr(Hf)F$_4$.

**Crystal structures**

The tetragonal crystal structure (β-ZrF$_4$) and the unidentified crystal structure (γ-ZrF$_4$) transform irreversibly to the monoclinic structure at temperatures in excess of 400 °C. This is evident on the DTA curve of the ZrF$_4$ at approximately 440 °C (Brown *et al.*, 2005).

### 4.2.3 Scanning electron microscope

A scanning electron microscope (SEM) image indicated that the particles formed agglomerates and that no definite geometry was apparent for the respective particles (Figure 4-4). This implies that it
would be difficult to develop a sublimation model that is dependent on the particle geometry (Van der Merwe & Snyders, 2016).

![Image](image1.jpg)

Figure 4-4: (a) SEM image indicating very small Zr(Hf)F₄ particles along with the larger zircon and PDZ particles, (b) 30 μm magnification indicating agglomerates of small Zr(Hf) particles

### 4.2.4 Particle analysis

The absolute density of the Zr(Hf)F₄ was determined to be 4.487 g·cm⁻³. An AccuPyc II 1340 Gas Displacement Pyconemeter for volume measurements and density calculations was used. Table 4-3 shows the average particle size distributions of the Zr(Hf)F₄ sample determined with a Saturn DigiSizer II Analyzer. It was mentioned that the homogeneity of the sample could not be ensured prior to analysis and segregation of heavier particles into the sample container during storage could therefore be a relevant factor. Blending and sample splitting services prior to the analysis of bulk (larger samples) were carried out (Van der Merwe & Snyders, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diameter</th>
<th>Average particle size (μm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D₁₀</td>
<td>5.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D₅₀</td>
<td>21.409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D₉₀</td>
<td>82.436</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5:  Model development

5.1 Properties of ZrF$_4$, HfF$_4$ and N$_2$

This chapter discusses the vapour pressures of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$, the physical properties of ZrF$_4$, HfF$_4$, metal fluoride impurities and N$_2$, the thermodynamic properties of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$, the mass and thermal diffusion coefficients for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in nitrogen, the flow properties and the heat and mass transfer correlations used in the sublimer and desublimer.

5.1.1 Vapour pressures

Vapour pressure of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$

Figure 5-1 gives a range of vapour pressures from several sources in the literature for both ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ at temperatures above 600 °C (Sense, Snyder & Clegg, 1953; Sense, Snyder & Filbert, 1954; Cantor et al., 1958; Benedict et al., 1981; and Koreneo et al., 1972).

![Vapour pressures for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ as reported in the literature](image)

Figure 5-1: Vapour pressures for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ as reported in the literature

A higher temperature will result in a larger vapour pressure difference between ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$, which implies a larger difference in the partial pressures of the two tetrafluorides in the bulk nitrogen gas stream. A larger partial pressure difference results in a larger difference in the desublimation temperatures of the two respective components.

The data in Figure 5-1 were combined and can be expressed as Antoine constants for both ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$. These are illustrated by the correlations in Table 5-1.
Table 5-1: Combined vapour pressure correlations for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Vapour pressure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Temperature range [°C]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZrF$_4$</td>
<td>$\log(P) = 12.096 - \frac{11879}{T}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HfF$_4$</td>
<td>$\log(P) = 12.391 - \frac{12649}{T}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vapour pressures for these correlations also include those at temperatures below 600 °C (Brunetti et al., 2011; Konings & Hildenbrand, 1994; Koreneo et al., 1972; Nielsen, 2001).

The standard error for the correlation given for ZrF$_4$ was calculated for both constants using the LINEST function in Microsoft Excel. The standard error for the constants A and B was found to be 48.2 and 0.055 respectively. Since only one set of data was available for HfF$_4$ (taken in 1972) and since ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ have many similarities, the assumption can be made that the data given for HfF$_4$ have a similar standard error.

Vapour pressures of some metal fluoride impurities

The vapour pressures of ZrF$_4$ and some metal impurities at 827 °C are listed in Table 5-2.

Table 5-2: Vapour pressures of metal fluoride impurities (Robinson, 1986: 189)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metal fluoride</th>
<th>Vapour pressure (kPa)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZrF$_4$</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeF$_3$</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeF$_2$</td>
<td>1.87E-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CuF$_2$</td>
<td>3.47E-03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CuF</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NiF$_2$</td>
<td>5.33E-04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These vapour pressures are required for the selection of the optimal sublimation temperature so as not to sublime the impurities along with the ZrF$_4$. It can be seen that the vapour pressures of FeF$_3$ and CuF are closest to that of ZrF$_4$ at 827 °C. This implies that Fe and Cu contribute most to impurity complications of the ZrF$_4$. 

5-2
5.1.2 Physical properties of nitrogen

Equations 9 to 12 give temperature-dependent correlations for the dynamic viscosity, heat capacity and density of the nitrogen.

\[
\mu_{N_2}(T) = 4.2606 \times 10^{-6} + 4.75 \times 10^{-8} T - 9.88 \times 10^{-12} T^2
\]  

(9)

\[
Cp_{N_2}(T) = 1.08 - 1.26 \times 10^{-4} T + 3.6 \times 10^{-7} T^2 - 1.59 \times 10^{-10} T^3 + 9.26 \times 10^{-15} T^4
\]  

(10)

\[
\rho_{N_2}(T) = \frac{PMM_{N_2}}{RT}
\]  

(11)

\[
k_{N_2}(T) = 3.09 \times 10^{-3} + 7.59 \times 10^{-5} T - 1.101 \times 10^{-8} T^2
\]  

(12)

Where \( T \) is the temperature in K, \( \mu_{N_2} \) is the dynamic viscosity in kg\( \cdot \)m\(^{-1}\)\( \cdot \)s\(^{-1} \), \( Cp_{N_2} \) is the heat capacity in kJ\( \cdot \)kg\(^{-1}\)K\(^{-1} \), \( \rho_{N_2} \) is the density in kg\( \cdot \)m\(^{-3} \), \( P \) is the pressure in kPa, \( MM_{N_2} \) is the molar mass in kg\( \cdot \)kmol\(^{-1} \), \( R \) is the ideal gas constant (8.314 kPa\( \cdot \)m\(^3\)\( \cdot \)kmol\(^{-1}\)K\(^{-1} \)) and \( k_{N_2} \) is the thermal conductivity in W\( \cdot \)m\(^{-1}\)K\(^{-1} \). Values for these properties at several operating temperatures are listed in Table 5-3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature [°C]</th>
<th>( \mu_{N_2} ) [kg( \cdot )m(^{-1})( \cdot )s(^{-1} )]</th>
<th>( Cp_{N_2} ) [kJ( \cdot )kg(^{-1})K(^{-1} )]</th>
<th>( k_{N_2} ) [W( \cdot )m(^{-1})K(^{-1} )]</th>
<th>( \rho_{N_2} ) [kg( \cdot )m(^{-3} )]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>1.754 \times 10^5</td>
<td>1.038</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>1.131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>650</td>
<td>3.969 \times 10^5</td>
<td>1.123</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700</td>
<td>4.112 \times 10^5</td>
<td>1.132</td>
<td>0.067</td>
<td>0.346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750</td>
<td>4.251 \times 10^5</td>
<td>1.140</td>
<td>0.069</td>
<td>0.329</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1.3 Physical properties of ZrF\(_4\), HfF\(_4\) and other metal fluoride impurities

An estimation was made of the metal fluoride impurities present in the ZrF\(_4\) manufactured from the fluorination of plasma-dissociated zircon with ammonium bifluoride (Pretorius, 2013). Solov’ev et al. studied the vacuum sublimation separation of HfF\(_4\) from ZrF\(_4\), with ZrF\(_4\) being produced from natural zircon. Impurities in addition to those in the study above that are mentioned to be present in zircon are CoF\(_2\), NiF\(_2\) and LaF\(_3\) (Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002b). The melting and boiling points of these impurities are listed in Table 5-4.
### Table 5-4: Melting, boiling and/or sublimation temperatures of some metal fluorides

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metal fluoride</th>
<th>Melting point [°C]</th>
<th>Boiling point [°C]</th>
<th>Sublimation point [°C]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ZrF$_4$</td>
<td>841 – 892$^{*4}$</td>
<td>906$^{*1}$</td>
<td>912$^{*2}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HfF$_4$</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>974$^{*1}$ / 968$^{*3}$</td>
<td>970$^{*2}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeF$_2$</td>
<td>1 100$^{*1}$</td>
<td>1 837$^{*1}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TiF$_3$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>950$^{*4}$ decompose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AlF$_3$</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 279$^{*1}$</td>
<td>1 276$^{*2}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CrF$_3$</td>
<td>1 425$^{*2}$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MgF$_2$</td>
<td>1 263$^{*2}$</td>
<td>2 227$^{*2}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CaF$_2$</td>
<td>1 418$^{*2}$</td>
<td>2 500$^{*2}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UF$_4$</td>
<td>1 036$^{*2}$</td>
<td>1 417$^{*2}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ThF$_4$</td>
<td>1 110$^{*2}$</td>
<td>1 680$^{*2}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoF$_2$</td>
<td>1 130$^{*1}$</td>
<td>1 130$^{*1}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NiF$_2$</td>
<td>1 283$^{*1}$</td>
<td>1 474$^{*1}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaF$_3$</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 136$^{*1}$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{*1}$Solov’ev & Malyutina, 2002b  
$^{*2}$CRC handbook of chemistry and physics, 2008  
$^{*3}$Nielsen, 2001  
$^{*4}$Brown et al., 2005: 147

From Table 5-4 it is evident that the sublimation temperatures must not exceed 1 000 °C to ensure that impurities are not sublimed, thereby contaminating the sublimation product.

**Density of ZrF$_4$**

In the work done by Abate and Wilhelm, a 12.725 cm cylinder was used as the sublimation retort with a sublimation area of 127.2 cm$^2$. A 2 kg charge was fed into the reactor which was initially 15.27 cm deep. This results in a heap density of 1.03 g·cm$^{-3}$ (Abate & Wilhelm, 1951). No mention was made as to whether the charge was pushed down the cylinder to form a slightly compressed pellet, or was only slightly tapped. Looking at the equipment used, it may be assumed that no compression of the powder took place, since the baffles are placed well above the charge (Figure 2-2). The crystal density of ZrF$_4$ is 4.43 g·cm$^{-3}$ (Nielsen et al., 2001).
Phases and structures of ZrF₄

Zirconium is found in different forms. There are an amorphous phase and three crystalline phases: \(\alpha\)-ZrF₄, \(\beta\)-ZrF₄ and \(\gamma\)-ZrF₄. The \(\beta\)-ZrF₄ phase is known to be thermodynamically stable at room temperature and has a monoclinic structure. The \(\alpha\)-ZrF₄ phase, however, has a tetragonal structure and is known to transform to the stable \(\beta\)-ZrF₄ at higher temperatures (Rivas et al., 1997). The transformation of the \(\alpha\)-ZrF₄ and \(\gamma\)-ZrF₄ phases to the \(\beta\)-ZrF₄ phase occurs at temperatures exceeding 400 °C (Brown et al., 2005: 144).

Hygroscopicity of ZrF₄ and HfF₄

In a study on the hyperfine characterisation of \(\beta\)-ZrF₄, it was found that \(\beta\)-ZrF₄ is stable in dry N₂ atmosphere between 0 °C and 467 °C and an exposure to wet-air streams has no effects on the hyperfine interaction pattern at room temperature. \(\alpha\)-ZrF₄ is moisture sensitive and forms stable hydrated varieties of ZrF₄, e.g. ZrF₄·3H₂O and ZrF₄·H₂O (Rivas et al., 1997). The same should apply for HfF₄.

HfF₄·3H₂O begins its dehydration above 57 °C, where HfF₄ is the predominant dehydration product with approximately 30 % HfF₄·H₂O remaining (Martínez et al., 1983; Caracoche et al., 1985). Anhydrous HfF₄ can be achieved at 120 °C (Caracoche et al., 1985). The same should apply for ZrF₄.

ZrF₄ form after sublimation

Vacuum sublimation of macroscopic crystals of ZrF₄, prepared by the hydrofluorination of ZrO₂ at 700 °C, yielded transparent crystals with an average dimension of several millimetres and faintly violet in colour (Westrum, 1965). In another study, ZrF₄ was prepared and sublimated in dry HF at 825 °C. 25 g of the resulting water-white needles were then loaded into a 5 cm diameter vitreous carbon crucible and heated to the growth temperature of 650 °C in a flowing atmosphere of diluted HF in He. After 3 days at 650 °C, the mass was cooled to room temperature over a one-day time period. The product formed one clear and transparent continuous uncracked cylindrical disk which underwent only minor cracking during cooldown. Figure 5-2 shows the crystals formed in this study (Robinson & Fuller, 1987).
5.1.4 Thermodynamic properties of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$

Melting of ZrF$_4$

The heat of fusion for ZrF$_4$ at the melting point given in Table 5-4 is -64.22 kJ·mol$^{-1}$, with a liquid ZrF$_4$ formation enthalpy of -1 975.5 kJ·mol$^{-1}$ (Brown et al., 2005: 147).

Enthalpy and entropy of sublimation for ZrF$_4$

The heat of sublimation is a crucial parameter in determining the possibility of separating two components in a mixture (Green, 2000). For ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ this is, however, more complicated due to their similarities. It can, however, be useful when determining the possibility of separating the metal impurities from the Zr(Hf)F$_4$ mixture. The enthalpy of sublimation for ZrF$_4$ is approximately 240 kJ·mol$^{-1}$ (Brown et al., 2005; van der Vis et al., 1997; Sense et al., 1954; Konings & Hildenbrand, 1994).

The entropy of sublimation for ZrF$_4$ is 125.6 J·mol$^{-1}$·K$^{-1}$ (Cantor et al., 1958).

Enthalpy and entropy of formation

The free energies of formation for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ are listed in Table 5-5.
Table 5-5: Free energy of formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>( \Delta H_{\text{form}} ) [kJ·mol(^{-1})]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Benedict et al., 1981)</td>
<td>ZrF(_4^*)</td>
<td>-1 582.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Benedict et al., 1981)</td>
<td>HfF(_4^*)</td>
<td>-1 519.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\(^\dagger\)Energy of formation from elements at 1 000 K

Table 5-6 lists some chemical thermodynamic data for ZrF\(_4\) in the solid and gaseous state (Brown et al., 2005; Van der Vis et al., 1997).

Table 5-6: Chemical thermodynamic data for ZrF\(_4\) in the solid and gaseous state

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>( \Delta G_f^\circ ) [kJ·mol(^{-1})]</th>
<th>( \Delta H_f^\circ ) [kJ·mol(^{-1})]</th>
<th>( S^\circ ) [J·mol(^{-1})·K(^{-1})]</th>
<th>( C_p^\circ ) [J·mol(^{-1})·K(^{-1})]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>β-ZrF(_4)</td>
<td>-1 810.12</td>
<td>-1 911.3</td>
<td>104.7-105.3</td>
<td>102.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZrF(_4) (g)</td>
<td>-1 634.58</td>
<td>-1 671.1-1 673.6</td>
<td>319.4-322.1</td>
<td>87.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5-3 to Figure 5-5 give the heat capacity, standard enthalpy and entropy of both solid and gaseous ZrF\(_4\) as a function of temperature.

![Figure 5-3: Heat capacity as a function of temperature](image)
Dehydration of Zr(OH)$_4$ to ZrO$_2$(cr)

Zr(OH)$_4$ dehydration energies depend on several properties, i.e. aging, preparation method, etc. The energy of dehydration to the monoclinic form of ZrO$_2$ can be in the order of $-15.8 \pm 4.5$ to $8.2 \pm 4.4$, depending on the type of Zr(OH)$_4$ (Brown et al., 2005).

5.1.5 Diffusion coefficients

Thermal separation processes are mass transfer operations which are driven by molecular forces. At least two phases (the mixture phase as well as an auxiliary phase) are present wherein mass and often heat, exchange occurs. The required driving forces are concentration and temperature gradients (Sattler & Feindt, 1995).

Mass diffusion coefficients

In order to calculate the mass transfer coefficient which is required to estimate the sublimation rate, it is first necessary to determine the diffusion coefficients of both ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in nitrogen. The range for diffusivity of a gas at atmospheric pressure is $1 \times 10^{-2}$ cm$^2$ s$^{-1}$ to $10^{-2}$ cm$^2$ s$^{-1}$ (Perry & Green, 2008).
The diffusion coefficient can be expressed by the Lennard-Jones potential to evaluate the influence of the molecular forces between the molecules. This correlation, also known as the Chapman-Enskog equation, holds for binary gas mixtures of nonpolar, non-reacting species (Perry & Green, 1997; Welty, 2001), which is the case for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in nitrogen.

\[
D_{LN2} = \frac{0.001858 \cdot T^{3/2} \cdot \left[ \frac{1}{MM_i} + \frac{1}{MM_{N2}} \right]^{1/2}}{P \sigma_{LN2}^2 \Omega_D}
\]  

Equation 13

Here $i$ represents either ZrF$_4$ or HfF$_4$. $T$ is the absolute temperature in K, $P$ is the absolute pressure in atmospheres, $MM$ is the molecular weight, $\sigma_{LN2}$ is the collision diameter, a Lennard-Jones parameter in Å and $\Omega_D$ is the collision integral for molecular diffusion. If the molecular volume, critical temperatures or boiling temperatures of the components are known, then these values can be estimated with empirical relations.

**Collision diameter ZrF$_4$**

Equation 14 can be used to calculate the collision diameter of nitrogen with ZrF$_4$ ($\sigma_{N2ZrF4}$) and HfF$_4$ ($\sigma_{N2HfF4}$). An example is given for ZrF$_4$.

\[
\sigma_{N2ZrF4} = \frac{\sigma_{N2} + \sigma_{ZrF4}}{2}
\]

The value for $\sigma_{N2}$ is listed in the literature as 3.798 Å (Reid et al., 1988), but these Lennard-Jones parameters are only available for a few pure gases and values for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ may be obtained using empirical correlations. These correlations are, however, dependent on the molecular volumes, the critical volumes and the critical temperatures and pressures, which are not attainable for ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$. Since $\sigma$ is denoted as the Lennard-Jones diameter of the respective spherical molecule (Welty, 2001), an estimation will be made for the diameter of a ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ molecule with the assumption of spherical molecules. Obtaining such data for both ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in the gas phase is difficult and it will therefore be assumed that a single ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ molecule in the gas phase has the same dimensions as a molecule in the solid state.

Sizes of the respective molecules were calculated at room temperature with the use of Spartan software (’14 V1.1.4). The equilibrium geometry was calculated with the Hartree-Fock method with the 6-31* parameter set. Table 5-7 gives a summary of the respective values obtained.
The assumptions made are as follows (a similar approach was used for HfF₄):

- The ZrF₄ molecule approaches a spherical molecule and therefore the diameter approaches the distance between the centre of two opposite F atoms.
- The lengths between all Zr and F atoms are equal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Diameter element (Å)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diameter of element F</td>
<td>1.5138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance between two F atoms in ZrF₄ molecule</td>
<td>3.098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance between two F atoms in HfF₄ molecule</td>
<td>3.059</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Equation 14 can now be used to calculate an estimated value for the respective collision diameters. These are listed in Table 5-8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collision diameter</th>
<th>Diameter element (Å)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>( \sigma_{N₂ZrF₄} )</td>
<td>4.205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \sigma_{N₂HfF₄} )</td>
<td>4.185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Collision integral**

The collision integral \( (\Omega_D) \) is a dimensionless parameter and a function of the Boltzmann constant \( \kappa \) (1.38 x 10⁻¹⁶ ergs·K⁻¹), the temperature and the energy of molecular interaction \( \epsilon_{i,N₂} \). Equation 15 can be used to calculate the molecular interaction of nitrogen with ZrF₄ \( (\epsilon_{N₂ZrF₄}) \). A similar approach is used for the case of HfF₄.

\[
\epsilon_{N₂ZrF₄} = \sqrt{\epsilon_{ZrF₄} \epsilon_{N₂}}
\]  

(15)

The value of \( \epsilon_i/\kappa \) for nitrogen gas equals 71.4 (Reid et al., 1988). Values for \( \epsilon_{ZrF₄} \) and \( \epsilon_{HfF₄} \) may be obtained with the use of empirical correlations if the critical temperature \( (T_c) \) or the normal boiling temperature \( (T_b) \) of the components are known:

\[
\epsilon_i/\kappa = 0.77 \ T_c
\]  

(16)

\[
\epsilon_i/\kappa = 1.15 \ T_b
\]  

(17)
The boiling points for ZrF₄ (912 °C) and HfF₄ (970 °C) are available in the literature (Lide, 2007). These are also indicated as the respective sublimation points. It is common knowledge that ZrF₄ sublimes at temperatures around 600 °C, but for purposes of calculating the Lennard-Jones parameters, the values of 912 °C and 970 °C will be assumed to be satisfactory. Table 5-9 gives the values for the energy of molecular interaction which can be used to determine the collision integrals from the Lennard-Jones constants table (Welty, 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collision integral parameters</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ε_{ZrF₄}</td>
<td>1.881 x 10^{-13} erg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ε_{HfF₄}</td>
<td>1.973 x 10^{-13} erg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ε_{N₂ZrF₄}</td>
<td>4.305 x 10^{-14} erg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ε_{N₂HfF₄}</td>
<td>4.409 x 10^{-14} erg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The values of $K T / ε_{N₂ZrF₄}$ and $K T / ε_{N₂HfF₄}$ are calculated and used to determine the values of the collision integrals $Ω_{DN₂ZrF₄}$ and $Ω_{DN₂HfF₄}$. These are inputs to the diffusion coefficient calculation (Equation 13) for ZrF₄ and HfF₄ in nitrogen as a function of the sublimation temperature (Table 5-10).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature (°C)</th>
<th>$D_{N₂ZrF₄}$ (cm²·s⁻¹)</th>
<th>$D_{N₂HfF₄}$ (cm²·s⁻¹)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>700</td>
<td>0.703</td>
<td>0.687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>750</td>
<td>0.768</td>
<td>0.751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>0.836</td>
<td>0.817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>850</td>
<td>0.908</td>
<td>0.887</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Testing the method for determining the diffusion coefficients**

The Lennard-Jones parameters for the diffusion coefficient of SF₆ in nitrogen were calculated with the same method as that used for ZrF₄ and HfF₄ in nitrogen. Using Spartan software, the diameter of an SF₆ molecule was determined to be 3.108 Å, resulting in a collision diameter with nitrogen of 4.151 Å.

The collision integral was estimated with the use of the boiling temperature of SF₆, which is -64 °C.
Table 5-11 lists some calculated and literature values (Marrero & Mason, 1972) for the diffusion coefficient of SF₆ in nitrogen at several temperatures. Since the calculated values are very close to the literature values, the assumption will be made that the method is good enough for determination of the diffusion coefficients of ZrF₄ and HfF₄ in nitrogen.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Calculated value (cm²·s⁻¹)</th>
<th>Literature value (cm²·s⁻¹)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.15309</td>
<td>0.14699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>0.23240</td>
<td>0.23099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>727</td>
<td>0.87951</td>
<td>0.86298</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Thermal diffusion coefficients**

Kim (2013) showed that the theoretical foundation of thermal diffusion is still Einstein’s random walk and added the spatial heterogeneity of the random walk to reflect the temperature gradient of thermal diffusion. The thermal diffusivity and the Soret coefficient (Sₜ) was then determined theoretically. The walk speed Sₗ corresponds to the speed of the Brownian particles, which is a function of the temperature. The molecular description of the thermal diffusion coefficient is given by:

\[ D_1^T = \frac{D_1 N_2}{S_w} \frac{dS_w}{dT}. \]  

(18)

The Soret coefficient therefore becomes:

\[ S_T = \frac{1}{S_w} \frac{dS_w}{dT}. \]  

(19)

According to Einstein’s equipartition theorem, the speed v satisfies:

\[ \frac{1}{2} M_B v^2 = \frac{3}{2} \kappa T, \]  

(20)

Where \( M_B \) is the mass of a Brownian particle, \( T \) is the temperature and \( \kappa \) is the Boltzmann coefficient. Here \( T \) is defined by the mean of the kinetic energy of particles. The
velocity is understood as the average velocity in the root mean square sense and therefore it corresponds to the walk speed $S_w$ of the random walk system. Therefore:

$$S_w \equiv v = \sqrt{\frac{3kT}{M_B}} = c\sqrt{T}. \quad (21)$$

Integration of $\frac{1}{S} \frac{dS}{dT}$ yields:

$$\frac{1}{S_w} \frac{dS_w}{dT} = \frac{1}{c\sqrt{T}} \frac{d(c\sqrt{T})}{dT} = \frac{1}{2T} \quad (22)$$

and therefore

$$D_i^T = \frac{D_{LN2}}{2T} \quad (23)$$

This equation is also used by Nakashima and Takeyama(1989). The Soret coefficient is described as follows:

$$S_T = \frac{1}{2T} \quad (24)$$

It is interesting to note that it is not necessary to know the actual particle speed of the Brownian particles in order to calculate $D_i^T$ and $S_T$.

### 5.1.6 Flow properties

The mol fractions of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in the bulk nitrogen gas stream are relatively low due to the large partial pressure of the nitrogen. Most of the flow properties, i.e. Reynolds numbers, Prandtl numbers, etc. are calculated from properties of the nitrogen alone. The Reynolds number is given by Equation (14).

$$Re = \frac{u \cdot D_e \cdot \rho_{N_2}(T)}{\mu_{N_2}(T)} \quad (25)$$

Where $u$ is the linear velocity in m·s$^{-1}$ and $D_e = \frac{4A_{flow}}{perimeter}$ is the equivalent flow diameter in m and $A_{flow}$ is the flow area in m$^2$. 

5-13
5.1.7 Heat transfer

The Prandtl number (Equation 15) for gases should range between 0.7 and 1, which indicates both momentum and heat dissipate through the fluid at about the same time (Çengel & Klein, 2007). The Prandtl number for the current system was calculated as 0.7.

\[Pr = \frac{CP_{N_2}(T) \cdot \mu_{N_2}(T)}{k_{N_2}(T)} \]  

(26)

Tip of the desublimer

Convective heat transfer for forced convection over a flat plate (in this case the tip of the desublimer) for laminar flow conditions with Reynolds number < 5 x 10^5 and Prandtl number > 0.6 can be calculated as follows for ZrF₄ and HfF₄ respectively (Çengel, 2006).

\[Nu = 0.664Re^{0.5}Pr^{1/3} \]  

(27)

Since the flow in the case of the desublimer tip is not parallel to the plate, but is a cross-flow, a correlation was required to estimate the Nusselt number for cross-flow. The correlation proposed by Churchill and Bernstein for cross-flow over a cylinder was used and the result compared to that obtained for flow over a flat plate (Hewitt et al., 1994):

\[Nu = 0.3 + 0.62 \left( \frac{Re^{1/2}Pr^{1/3}}{1 + \left( \frac{0.4}{Pr^{2/3}} \right)^{1/4}} \right) \left[ 1 + \left( \frac{Re}{28,200} \right)^{5/8} \right]^{4/5} \]  

(28)

Annulus section of the desublimer

Nusselt numbers for laminar flow in annuli may be predicted by the following correlation (Perry & Green, 1997: 5-15):

\[Nu = 1.02 \cdot Re^{0.45} \cdot Pr^{0.5} \left( \frac{D_e}{L_{c,desub}} \right)^{0.4} \left( \frac{D_2}{D_1} \right)^{0.8} \left( \frac{\mu_D}{\mu_w} \right)^{0.14} \cdot Gr^{0.05} \]  

(29)

Where Re is the Reynolds number calculated using the equivalent diameter of heat transfer, Pr is the Prandtl number, \(L_{c,desub} = D_2 - D_1\) is the characteristic length of the annulus section of the
desublimer, where $D_2$ and $D_1$ are the outer and inner diameters of the annulus. $D_e = \frac{4 \cdot \text{Flow Area}}{\pi (D_2 + D_1)}$ is the equivalent diameter, $\mu_b$ is the viscosity at the bulk temperature, $\mu_w$ is the viscosity at the wall temperature and $Gr$ is the Grashof number given by Equation (30):

$$Gr = \frac{g \cdot \beta \cdot p^2 \cdot \Delta T \cdot L_{c,desub}^3}{\mu^2} \quad (30)$$

Where $\beta = 1/T_{film}$ is the gas expansion coefficient and $\Delta T$ is the difference between the bulk temperature and the desublimer temperature.

All properties are determined at the film temperature which is the average between the bulk gas and desublimer wall temperature.

**Convective heat transfer coefficient**

The convective heat transfer coefficient can be calculated as follows:

$$h_{conv} = \frac{Nu \cdot k_{N_2}(T)}{D_{eH}} \quad (31)$$

Where $D_{eH}$ is the equivalent diameter of heat transfer, which at the tip of the desublimer was taken as half that of the desublimer diameter. At the annulus section of the desublimer $D_{eH} = \frac{4 \cdot \text{Flow Area}}{\pi D_1}$, where $D_2$ is the diameter of the annulus.

**5.1.8 Mass transfer**

Schmidt numbers are dependent on the diffusion coefficient and are therefore calculated for both ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$.

$$Sc_i = \frac{\mu_{N_2}(T)}{D_{1N_2}(P, T) \cdot \rho_{N_2}(T)} \quad (32)$$

**Annulus section**

The Sherwood number could not be found for an annulus section. However, these correlations are the mass transfer analogues to heat transfer correlations of the Nusselt number. For a given
geometry, a heat transfer correlation for the Nusselt number in terms of the Reynolds number and the Prandtl number can be used as a mass transfer correlation by replacing the Prandtl number with the analogous dimensionless number for mass transfer, the Schmidt number and replacing the Nusselt number with the analogous dimensionless number for mass transfer, the Sherwood number.

The mass transfer analogue to Equation 29, which is the Sherwood number, can therefore be expressed as follows:

$$S_{hl} = 1.02 \cdot Re^{0.45} \cdot Sc_i^{0.5} \cdot \left( \frac{D_e}{L_{c,desub}} \right)^{0.4} \cdot \left( \frac{D_2}{D_1} \right)^{0.8} \cdot \left( \frac{\mu_b}{\mu_w} \right)^{0.14} \cdot Gr^{0.05}$$  \hspace{1cm} (33)

**Tip of the desublimer**

The mass transfer analogue to heat transfer at the tip of the desublimer for laminar flow conditions with Reynolds number $< 5 \times 10^5$ and Schmidt number $> 0.6$, the Sherwood number is given by Equation (34) (Çengel, 2006: 817):

$$S_{hl} = 0.664 Re^{0.5} Sc_i^{1/3}$$  \hspace{1cm} (34)

The analogue of the Churchill and Bernstein correlation for cross-flow over a cylinder was also used and the result compared to that obtained for flow over a flat plate (Hewitt et al., 1994):

$$S_{hl} = 0.3 + \frac{0.62 Re^{1/2} Sc_i^{1/3}}{[1 + (0.4 Sc_i^{-2/3})^{1/4}]} [1 + \left( \frac{Re}{28200} \right)^{5/8}]^{4/5}$$  \hspace{1cm} (35)

**Mass transfer coefficient**

The mass transfer coefficient is a function of the Sherwood number, diffusion coefficient and characteristic length. In the sublimer, the characteristic length ($L_{c,sub}$) was taken as the width of the bed at any given time increment.

$$k_i = \frac{S_{hl} \cdot D_i N_2(P,T)}{L_{c,sub}}$$  \hspace{1cm} (36)

In the desublimer, the characteristic length is the equivalent flow diameter in the annulus section and half the outer pipe diameter at the tip of the desublimer.
5.1.9 Lewis number

The Lewis number is a dimensionless number defined as the ratio of thermal diffusivity to mass diffusivity. It is used to characterize a fluid governed by both mass and heat transfer.

\[
Le_i = \frac{Sc_i}{Pr}
\]  

In the case where \( Le > 1 \), the process is governed by thermal diffusion. This implies that there is not enough time for the desublimating product to be delivered to the desublimator surface in the form of vapour and the process of volumetric desublimation is the dominant one. Volumetric desublimation occurs where the desublimate will transfer from the surface into the volume of gas-vapour mixture (Smolkin et al., 2007).

5.2 Development of a model for the pre-heating of the nitrogen

Nitrogen used as a sweep gas during the sublimation of Zr(Hf)F\(_4\). Pre-heating of the nitrogen is required before the nitrogen enters the section where sublimation takes place. It must be noted that nitrogen does not participate in radiation exchange as with other gases such as CO\(_2\) and water (Çengel, 2006: 746). It is therefore assumed that the nitrogen is only heated by convection.

5.2.1 Model of pre-heating

Figure 5-6 gives an illustration of a 15 m length of ¼” copper tubing spiralled around the tube furnace pipe which facilitates sublimation. The purpose is to pre-heat the nitrogen used as a sweep gas.
The nitrogen enters one side of the copper tubing and exits into the tube furnace. The nitrogen, now inside the pipe, is then further heated up to the space just before the sublimer.

The following assumptions were made for modelling the pre-heating of the nitrogen:

- Constant wall temperature
- Length of heating zone = 220 mm
- Negligible pressure drop
- Fully developed flow
- Properties are determined with length
- Homogeneous temperature distribution within control volume assumed
- The nitrogen velocity is determined from the set velocity in the desublimer. The velocity of the nitrogen in desublimers is approximately 0.1 m·s\(^{-1}\), which is the maximum velocity for the design of desublimers (Niemand, 2012). This amounts to approximately 0.3 kg·h\(^{-1}\) of nitrogen.

For fully developed flow under laminar flow conditions, the Nusselt and Sherwood numbers are equal to 3.66 (Çengel, 2006: 817) and only applies for Graetz numbers < 4 (Perry & Green, 1997: 5-15). For horizontal circular tubes and constant wall temperature, where 0.1 < Graetz number < 10\(^4\), the following correlation for the Nusselt number can be used (Perry & Green, 1997: 5-15):

\[
Nu = 3.66 + \frac{0.19_{Gz}^{0.8}}{14 + 0.117_{Gz}^{0.467}} \left( \frac{\mu_b}{\mu_w} \right)^{0.14};
\]

\[(39)\]
Where $G_z$ is the Graetz number, $\mu_b$ is the viscosity at the bulk temperature and $\mu_w$ is the viscosity at the wall temperature. The Graetz number is calculated as follows:

$$G_z = Re \cdot Pr \cdot \frac{d}{L} \quad (40)$$

Where $Pr$ is the Prandtl number, $d$ is the diameter and $L$ is the length of heat transfer.

The temperature of the gas film is the average between the bulk gas temperature and the wall temperature. All properties are calculated at the film temperature.

The average bulk temperature changes along the length of the tube according to Equation 41 (Çengel, 2006: 461).

$$T_{k+1} = T_w - (T_w - T_k) \cdot e^{-\left(\frac{h_{conv} \cdot A_{pipe}}{m \cdot C_p}\right)} \quad (41)$$

Where $T_k$ is the temperature at the $k^{th}$ increment, $T_w$ is the temperature of the wall, $h_{pipe}$ is the convective heat transfer coefficient of an empty pipe, $A_{pipe}$ is the surface area of the empty pipe, $m$ is the mass flow of the nitrogen gas and $C_p$ is the heat capacity of the nitrogen.

### 5.3 Development of a sublimation rate model

#### 5.3.1 Predicting sublimation rates

Smith predicted evaporation rates for liquid spills of chemical mixtures (Smith, 2001). These rates are based on the transport of components across a vapour-liquid interface.

The assumptions of this model applicable to sublimation are as follows:

- There are no concentration gradients in the solid phase.
- At the interface, the solid and vapour phases are in equilibrium. This implies that vapour pressure data can be used directly to determine the rate of transfer from the solid phase into the vapour phase.
- Mass transfer is described by a binary diffusion coefficient approximated from the properties of the individual components. These properties include temperature, pressure, molecular weight and the Lennard-Jones constants.
It is assumed that a thin film of nitrogen separates the vapour-solid interface from the bulk, which has a lower concentration of the chemical. Mass transfer develops quickly in a thin film, therefore it can be assumed that the concentration profile across the film is linear. This allows one to calculate the flux of the material (together with the associated diffusion coefficient). In other words, the evaporation rates of the components can be calculated.

Smith calculated the evaporation time of a liquid by using the vapour-liquid equilibrium relationship given in Equation 42.

\[
\frac{dN_i}{dt} = -Ak_i(P_i^* - p_i')\gamma_i x_i = \eta_i
\]

Where \(N_i\) is the number of moles of component \(i\); \(A\) is the area of the spill; \(k_i\) is the film theory average mass transfer coefficient; \(P_i^*\) is the vapour pressure of component \(i\); \(p_i'\) is the partial pressure of component \(i\) in the bulk gas; \(\gamma_i\) is the activity coefficient of component \(i\), which depends on both the temperature and the liquid phase mole fraction; \(x_i\) is the mole fraction of component \(i\) in the liquid phase; \(R\) is the universal gas constant; \(T\) is the temperature, \(t\) stands for time; and \(\eta_i\) is the sublimation rate. It is assumed that the activity coefficients of ZrF\(_4\) and HfF\(_4\) approach unity and can therefore be ignored. The same correlation is used to determine the sublimation rate of both ZrF\(_4\) and HfF\(_4\).

### 5.3.2 Sublimation mode

The sublimer is a reactor boat (Figure 3-2) 100 mm long and 20 mm deep which can take a maximum of 85 g Zr(Hf)F\(_4\). The Zr(Hf)F\(_4\) to be sublimed is placed in the boat which is placed in a pipe inside the tube furnace (see Figure 3-2, Figure 3-3 and Figure 3-6). Nitrogen is used as the carrier gas. The ZrF\(_4\) and HfF\(_4\) sublime and diffuse into the nitrogen stream. Figure 5-7 illustrates the sublimation mode, whereby the nitrogen enters the sublimer and mixes with a sublimed mass of ZrF\(_4\) and HfF\(_4\). Here \(r_{ZrF_4}\) is the sublimation rate, \(\Delta z\) is the length of the segment between positions \(j\) and \(j + 1, \bar{n}_j\) is the flux of either ZrF\(_4\) (or HfF\(_4\)) at the \(j^{th}\) position in the sublimation pan and \(\Delta H\) is the incremental height of the fraction of the bed that sublimed.
The following must be taken into account:

- Due to the geometry of the sublimer, the area of sublimation decreases as time proceeds. This implies that the flow area of the gas space above the bed increases as sublimation proceeds.
- The partial pressure of the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ increases as the bulk gas flows across the length of the bed.

The partial pressures of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ exiting the bed are therefore dependent on the extent of sublimation and will therefore change as time proceeds. Figure 5-8 illustrates a cross-section of the sublimer in the tube oven.
The cross-sectional bed area ($A_{cross}$) is calculated by dividing the volume of the bed (function of mass and bed density $\rho_B = 800 \text{ kg} \cdot \text{m}^{-3}$) by the length of the sublimation pan (100 mm). The value of $\theta_1$ (in radians) is calculated by solving $\theta_1$ in Equation 43.

$$A_{cross} = \frac{R^2}{2} (\theta_1 - \sin \theta_1) \tag{43}$$

Where $R$ is the pipe radius with the wall thickness of the sublimer and the spacing between the sublimer and pipe wall subtracted. Now that $\theta_1$ is known, the value of $b$ can be calculated.

$$b = R \sin \frac{\theta_1}{2} \tag{44}$$

Where $b$ is the base of the right-angle triangle $\theta_2$. With the value of $b$ known, the sublimation area ($A_{sub} = 2b \Delta z$), the time-dependent flow area of the gas above the sublimer ($A_{flow} = \frac{\pi D_{pipe}^2}{4} - A_{cross}$), the equivalent flow diameter ($D_{eq} = \frac{4A_{flow}}{(\pi D_{pipe} - S + 2b)}$) and the arc length $S = \theta_4 R$ can be calculated. These are then used to calculate the velocity and Reynolds number.

The change in flow area (due to the sublimation area decreasing) implies that the new time increment has different properties, i.e. a new equivalent flow diameter, new Reynolds number, new Sherwood number, new mass transfer coefficient and ultimately a new sublimation rate. Furthermore, due to the different vapour pressures of the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ at the sublimation temperature, the rate of sublimation of the two respective fluorides also differs, which implies that the composition of the bed changes as time proceeds.

As more ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ sublime and diffuse into the nitrogen stream along the length of the sublimation pan, the volume flow changes since the total pressure is assumed to remain constant. This implies a change in the velocity along the length of the sublimation pan, which has an influence on the Reynolds number and ultimately the rate of sublimation.

As time proceeds, the bed height and ultimately the sublimation area decrease with time, which implies that $\theta_1$ and $\theta_2$ are also functions of the extent of sublimation.
5.3.3 Continuity equation

The general relation for the mass balance may be stated as:

\[
\begin{align*}
\{ \text{Net rate of accumulation within control volume} \} &= \{ \text{Net rate of mass efflux from control volume} \} + \{ \text{Rate of generation within control volume} \} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(45)

which is the continuity equation and can be demonstrated in differential form according to Equation 46:

\[
\frac{d\rho}{dt} = -\nabla \cdot j + S
\]

(46)

Where \( \rho \) is the mol per unit volume (or area) and \( j = (\rho \vec{u}) \) is the flux where \( \vec{u} \) is the flow velocity vector field. \( S \) is the “source” or “sink” term which is the generation per unit volume (or area) per unit time. In this case the source term \( (S) \) is the sublimation rate \( (r_i) \).

The system is operated in such a way that no accumulation of mass occurs within the control volume \( \left( \frac{d\rho}{dt} = 0 \right) \), which implies that the net rate of mass efflux from the control volume equals the rate of sublimation. The continuity equation becomes:

\[
\nabla \cdot (\rho_i \vec{u}) = r_i
\]

(47)

Where \( i \) denotes ZrF\(_4\) and HfF\(_4\) respectively and \( r_i \) is the sublimation rate of ZrF\(_4\) (or HfF\(_4\)) in mol per unit sublimation area per unit time (Equation 48).

\[
r_i = \frac{k_i (P_i^* - P_i') x_i}{RT},
\]

(48)

Where \( k_i \) is the mass transfer coefficient in m\( \cdot \)s\(^{-1} \) at time \( t \), \( P_i^* \) is the vapour pressure in kPa, \( P_i' \) is the partial pressure in the bulk gas, \( x_i \) is the mol fraction of the ZrF\(_4\) (or HfF\(_4\)) in the unsublimed bulk mass, \( R \) is the ideal gas constant (8.314 kPa\( \cdot \)m\(^3\)\( \cdot \)kmol\(^{-1}\)\( \cdot \)K\(^{-1}\)) and \( T \) is the temperature in K.

5.3.4 Sublimation rate model

Assuming that the gas flowing above the bed is homogenously mixed within each control volume, the net rate of mass efflux from the control volume can be written as follows:
\[ \nabla \cdot (\rho_i \vec{u}) = \frac{1}{r} \frac{d}{dr} (r \rho_i u_r) + \frac{1}{r} \frac{d}{d\theta} (\rho_i u_\theta) + \frac{d}{dz} (\rho_i u_z) = \frac{d}{dz} (\rho_i u_z) \]  

(49)

The net rate of mass efflux from the control volume therefore reduces to:

\[ \frac{d}{dz} (\rho_i u_z) = \dot{n}_{j+1} - \dot{n}_j \]  

(50)

In order to calculate the change in total flux along the length of the sublimation pan, the pan is divided into segments of length \( \Delta z \) and the flux in each following segment is calculated by adding the flux in the previous segment to the sublimed masses of \( \text{ZrF}_4 \) and \( \text{HfF}_4 \) in segment \( j \) of length \( \Delta z \). The continuity equation therefore becomes:

\[ \dot{m}_{i,j+1,t_g} = \dot{m}_{i,j,t_g} + \frac{k_{i,j,t_s}(P_i^* - p_{i,j,t_s})}{RT} x_{i,t} M M_i \Delta z 2 b \]  

(51)

Where \( \dot{m}_{i,j,t_g} \) is the total mass flow at time \( t \) of species \( i \) in the gas phase at the \( j^{th} \) position.

**Time dependency**

The mass left in the sublimation pan reduces as sublimation continues and can be approximated by subtracting the total mass sublimed at time \( t \) from the mass in the bed at time \( t \):

\[ M_{i,t+1_s} = M_{i,t_s} - \sum_{j=1}^{n} \left( \frac{k_{i,j,t_s}(P_i^* - p_{i,j,t_s})}{RT} x_{i,t} M M_i \Delta z 2 b \right) \Delta t \]  

(52)

Where \( M_{i,t_s} \) is the mass of \( \text{ZrF}_4 \) or \( \text{HfF}_4 \) at time \( t \) and \( \Delta t \) is the time increment.

**5.3.5 Flow diagram for calculations of the sublimation process**

Nitrogen enters the sublimation section where both \( \text{ZrF}_4 \) and \( \text{HfF}_4 \) sublime and diffuse into the bulk. The partial pressures of both \( \text{ZrF}_4 \) and \( \text{HfF}_4 \) increase as the bulk gas moves across the sublimer. The area of sublimation, flow area and bed composition changes with time, which implies that the sublimation rates change as sublimation proceeds as do the desublimation of the respective compounds. Should the mass left be equal to zero (or a set minimum) then the loop will stop and sublimation is complete. Figure 5-9 shows the process flow calculations diagram for the sublimation process.
Sublimation

START

Temperature, Pressure, pipe diameter, Nitrogen flow, Mass loaded, Time increments, Sublimer incremental length, Zircon content, HfF composition, collision diameter, energy of molecular interaction

INPUTS

Determine initial properties at t=0: i.e. mole fractions

Initialisation t=0

New time increment

Mass ≥ 0

New length increment

Calculate properties f(length, time)

Mass transfer coefficient f(length, time)

Sublimation rate f(length, time)

Determine partial pressures in increment

Sublimed mass condenses on cold finger (Rate calculations Shown on separate flow diagram)

Gas flow reached end of sublimer?

Calculate total mass sublimed during time t

STOP

Function of: Bed composition, Sublimation area, Flow area, Equivalent diameter, Flow area, velocity, Reynolds number, diffusion coefficients, Schmidt numbers, Sherwood number

\[ k_{f,t} = \frac{S_f \cdot D_f}{D_{f,t}} \]

Use similar model as for evaporation of a liquid (R Smith, 2001)

\[ \frac{dN_1}{dt} = -N_1 \frac{(p_1 - p_1')f_1}{RT} \]

Mass @ 0

INPUTS

START

YES

NO

New time increment

Calculate total mass sublimed during time t

Counter added for total number of time increments

STOP

Data not provided.

Figure 5-9: Flow calculations for the sublimation of ZrF₄ and HfF₄ as a function of the sublimation time and the length of the bed
5.4 Development of a desublimation rate model

In a multicomponent system, there are fluxes of momentum, energy and mass, each resulting from a different driving force (Table 5-12).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flux</th>
<th>Driving forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Velocity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External force</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5-12: Relationships between fluxes and driving forces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flux</th>
<th>Driving forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Momentum</td>
<td>Newton’s law $[\mu, k]$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>Fourier’s law $[k]$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass</td>
<td>Soret effect $[D_i^T]$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are three “mechanical driving forces” that tend to produce movement of a species with respect to the mean fluid motion. These are concentration gradient, pressure gradient and external forces acting on the species. For purposes of this study, it will be assumed that the effects of pressure gradient and external forces are negligible (Bird et al., 1960: 564-565). Therefore the diffusion currents are made up of both density (Fick’s law) and temperature gradients (Ludwig-Soret effect). This macroscopic description of thermodiffusion dates back to the 19th century and was developed in the context of standard kinetic theory and therefore applies to dilute gas mixtures only (Debbasch & Rivet, 2011).

5.4.1 Concentration and thermal diffusion contributions to the mass flux

Since the diffusion currents are made up of density (Fick’s law) and temperature gradients (Ludwig-Soret effect), the mass flux can therefore be defined by two terms: (a) the concentration gradient, i.e. the concentration contribution to mass flux:

$$J_i^\omega = -D_{i,N2}\rho\nabla\omega_i$$  \hspace{1cm} (53)$$

and (b) the temperature gradient, i.e. the thermal diffusion contribution to mass flux:
\[ J_i^T = -D_i^T \rho \omega_i \nabla T \] (54)

\( D_{iN_2} \) is the mass diffusion constant \((m^2 \cdot s^{-1})\) of the diffusing species \(i\) in nitrogen, \( \rho \) is the density of the bulk gas \((kg \cdot m^{-3})\), \( \omega_i \) is the mass fraction of the diffusion species, \( D_i^T \) is the thermal diffusion coefficient \((a \text{ measure of the mass diffusion process due to temperature})\) and \( T \) is the temperature \((\text{Bird et al., 1960: 502; Dominguez et al., 2011; Kim, 2013})\).

The thermal diffusion term \((J_i^T)\) describes the tendency for species to diffuse under the influence of a temperature gradient. The species move toward colder regions and a concentration gradient is formed. The effect is small, but separations of mixtures can be effected with steep temperature gradients \((\text{Bird et al., 1960: 567; Kim, 2013})\).

The total mass flux is obtained by adding the concentration and temperature contributions together:

\[ J_i = J_i^\omega + J_i^T \] (55)

In preceding sections it was shown that \( D_i^T = \frac{D_{iN_2}}{2T} \) and therefore the total mass flux equation can now be written as:

\[ J_i = -D_{iN_2} \rho \nabla \omega_i - \rho \omega_i \frac{D_{iN_2}}{2T} \nabla T \] (56)

### 5.4.2 Desublimation mode

The desublimer is situated inside a bigger pipe, which facilitates the sublimation. The coordinates \(z\), \(r\) and \(\theta\) are defined in Figure 5-10.

![Figure 5-10: Definition of coordinates in annulus section of the desublimer](image)
Figure 5-11 gives an illustration of the two driving forces leading to mass transport to the surface. Here $\omega_{i,w}$ and $\omega_{i,b}$ are the mass fractions of the diffusion species at the wall and in the bulk gas respectively. $T_w$ and $T_b$ are the temperatures at the wall and in the bulk gas.

It is assumed that $\frac{d\omega_i}{d\theta} = 0$ and that $\frac{d\omega_i}{dr} \gg \frac{d\omega_i}{dz}$ and therefore:

$$\nabla \omega_i = \frac{d\omega_i}{dz} + \frac{d\omega_i}{dr} + \frac{d\omega_i}{d\theta} = \frac{d\omega_i}{dr}$$  \hspace{1cm} (57)

The same assumption applies for the temperature change, where it is assumed that $= \frac{dT}{dr}$.

The total mass flux equation now reduces to:

$$J_i = -D_{i,N_2}\rho \frac{d\omega_i}{dr} - \rho \omega_i \frac{D_{i,N_2}}{2T} \frac{dT}{dr}$$  \hspace{1cm} (58)
The concentration contribution to mass flux ($J_i^\omega$) can therefore be written as:

$$J_i^\omega = -D_i \rho \frac{d\omega_i}{dr} \equiv \frac{k_i^\omega \cdot MM_g \cdot (p_i^t - p_i^w)}{R T_f} \tag{59}$$

Where $k_i^\omega$ is the mass transfer coefficient in the desublimer which is a function of the mass diffusivity and the film thickness; $p_i^t$ is the partial pressure of species A in the bulk gas; $p_i^w$ is the vapour pressure at the wall temperature; and $T_f$ is the film temperature which is the average of the bulk and wall temperature. The temperature contribution to mass flux can therefore also be written as a function of the mass transfer coefficient, where $T_f$ is the film temperature.

$$J_i^T = -\rho \omega_i \frac{D_i \rho}{2T} \frac{dT}{dr} \equiv \frac{k_i^\omega \cdot MM_g \cdot p_i^t \cdot (T_b - T_w)}{2 \cdot R \cdot T_f^2} \tag{60}$$

5.4.3 Desublimation rate model

In order to calculate the change in total flux along the length of the desublimer (annulus), the length is divided into segments of length $\Delta z$ and the flux in each following segment is calculated by subtracting the desublimed masses of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in the segment from the flux in the previous segment. The incremental mass balance in the desublimer along the length of the annulus can therefore be expressed by the following equation:

$$\dot{m}_{i,j+1,g} = \dot{m}_{i,j,g} - \frac{k_i^\omega \cdot MM_g \Delta z}{R T_f} \left[ \frac{2 \pi D_1}{T_f} \left( p_i^t - p_i^w \right) + \frac{p_i^t \cdot (T_b - T_w)}{2 T_f} \right] \tag{61}$$

5.4.4 Flow calculations for the desublimation rate model

The flow calculations for the desublimation rate model are shown in Figure 5-12. The sublimed mass with calculated partial pressures for both the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in the gas mixture enters the desublimer space. These are dependent on time and change as sublimation proceeds. Both heat and mass transfer play a role as the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ desublime. The bulk gas first desublimes on the tip of the desublimer, which is closest to the sublimation space. As the gas passes along the length of the desublimer, both the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ desublime, resulting in an increase in gas enthalpy due to the exothermic nature of desublimation. The gas is also cooled by the desublimer as it passes along the length of the desublimer. Therefore the gas enthalpy is a function of the convection cooling and the rate of desublimation along the length of the desublimer. The calculated gas enthalpy is used to
obtain a gas temperature (assumed N₂ only), which is done by interpolating enthalpy data (Boulos et al., 1994). The new temperature at the next increment is now used to calculate the properties and the desublimation rate in the next increment.

Figure 5-12: Flow calculations for desublimation of ZrF₄ and HfF₄ as a function of length of time
Chapter 6: Results and discussion

6.1 Model parameters

6.1.1 Variables

Sublimation temperature – The temperatures studied included 740 °C, 760 °C and 790 °C.

6.1.2 Constants

Pressure – An absolute pressure of 87 kPa was used and kept constant (open system).

Nitrogen feed – The nitrogen velocity was determined from the set velocity in the desublimer. The velocity of the nitrogen in the desublimer was approximately 0.1 m·s⁻¹, which is a maximum velocity for the design of desublimers (Niemand, 2012). This amounts to approximately 0.3 kg·h⁻¹ of nitrogen at room temperature.

With a nitrogen flow of 0.3 kg·h⁻¹, the molar fractions of ZrF₄ and HfF₄ in the bulk gas stream at 740, 760 °C and 790 °C were below 0.01 %. This implies that the properties are relatively constant and independent of the contributing properties of the ZrF₄ and HfF₄. It is therefore assumed that the properties of nitrogen can be used as an estimate of the bulk gas properties.

Initial HfF₄ in bulk unsublimed material

The initial HfF₄ in bulk unsublimed material was calculated, assuming 1.32 % HfO₂ in PDZ (analysed by Pelindaba Analytical Laboratory on 6 July 2004) and 94 % dissociation of the zircon. The calculated initial HfF₄ content was 1.67 %.

6.2 Nitrogen preheating

Previous preheating of the nitrogen was achieved by flowing nitrogen over copper shavings at 700 °C in a separate muffle furnace. The outlet temperature of the nitrogen was 400 °C. The outlet of the muffle furnace was connected to the inlet of the tube furnace with one metre length of ½-inch copper tubing insulated with glass wool and tape. The nitrogen temperature measured at the entrance of the tube furnace was 30 °C, emphasising how quickly the nitrogen cools down. It is therefore assumed that the nitrogen heats up just as rapidly as it cools down.
With the oven at a set temperature and the additional preheating with ¼-inch copper coil on the outside of the pipe (Figure 5-6) and with the additional heating zone within the tube furnace, the temperature of the nitrogen gas at the sublimer point was assumed to be at the sublimation temperature, which was typically 30 °C lower than the set temperature of the oven.

### 6.3 Sublimation rate

The nomenclature Zr(Hf)F$_4$ defines a ZrF$_4$ crystal structure in which a percentage of the Hf is substituted for Zr. ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ behave differently in the vapour phase as a function of temperature, i.e. due to the differences in vapour pressures. This implies that HfF$_4$ is thermodynamically less stable than ZrF$_4$. It is therefore assumed that the ZrF$_4$ will sublime separately from the HfF$_4$ due to the differences in thermodynamic stability of the two compounds.

The rate is dependent on the vapour pressure as well as the concentration of the components in the bulk mass to be sublimed. This implies that ZrF$_4$ will sublime at a much higher rate than the HfF$_4$ due to the higher vapour pressure at the temperature of the sublimer. The sublimation rate was determined at different temperatures and is shown in Figure 6-1. Here $\alpha$ is the ratio of the actual mass sublimed to the maximum potential sublimate (i.e. zircon subtracted).

![Figure 6-1: Sublimation rate of Zr(Hf)F$_4$ as a function of the sublimation temperature](image)

One explanation for the sublimation rate forming a plateau before complete sublimation has been achieved (Figure 6-1) is the formation of a crust-like surface or sintered cake (Figure 6-2) which prevents further sublimation from occurring. This may be due to the presence of impurities.
originating from the zircon. The sublimation temperature stays the same, but sintering of the cake negatively influences the sublimation kinetics.

Figure 6-2: Sublimer residue indicating cake formation

Figure 6-3 illustrates the formation of humps in the sublimer residue which may be an indication that the Zr(Hf)F$_4$ also sublimes from the bulk mass and not only from the surface. The hump formation may also be an indication that sublimation is taking place within the bulk volume, but it is not necessarily precise to assume that these sublimed masses actually escaped. For purposes of this study, the experimental rates obtained are compared to the modelled rates obtained for dependency on surface area only.

Figure 6-3: Sublimer residue indicative of hump formation

The linear section in Figure 6-1 (experimental results) is most importance for purposes of determining the rate and is shown in Figure 6-4.
Figure 6-4: Linear section of the sublimation rate as a function of the temperature

The linear sections of the modelled rates are shown in Figure 6-5 and compared to the experimental results obtained. The model accurately predicts the rates of sublimation at the lower temperatures, but seems to over-predict at the higher temperatures.

Figure 6-5: Modelled sublimation rates compared with experimental results

The slope of the fraction sublimed versus time (dα/dt in Figure 6-5) was plotted as a function of the temperature (Figure 6-6). These are shown for both the experimental and modelled results.
Chapter 6: Results and discussion

It must be noted that the rate \( \frac{d\alpha}{dt} \) depends on the initial mass loaded (~15 g) as well as the sublimation area, with the sublimation area being a function of time.

This over-prediction of the sublimation rate at 790 °C may be even worse at even higher temperatures. For instance, the model predicts an average total flux of 7.34 g·m\(^{-2}\)·s\(^{-1}\) for ZrF\(_4\) and HfF\(_4\) subliming at 850 °C. This predicted value is 3.9 times higher than the value estimated from literature data (1.87 g·m\(^{-2}\)·s\(^{-1}\)). The flux at 850 °C could not be determined experimentally due to equipment and material constraints. One reason for this might be because of the impurities present in the sample used by MacFarlane et al. (2002), since the presence of impurities can have a direct influence on the sublimation rate (Ti et al., 1990c). Ti et al. found that the sublimation rates were 13 \% to 20 \% lower when industrial Zr(Hf)F\(_4\) samples were used compared to pure Zr(Hf)F\(_4\). This implies that the modelled values are allowed to differ from the experimental results obtained. It is assumed that these differences may be even higher at higher sublimation temperatures. However, under vacuum conditions, the flux was estimated from the literature to have an approximate value of 13.8 g·m\(^{-2}\)·s\(^{-1}\) at this temperature, which emphasizes the statement made by Abate and Wilhelm (1951) that the use of vacuum increases the movement of vapour.

To indicate the extreme effect of the temperature on the total sublimation time, the modelled result for the total sublimation time of 15 g Zr(Hf)F\(_4\) as a function of the sublimation temperature is shown in Figure 6-7. This is based on no crust formation and/or sintering of the cake.
Chapter 6: Results and discussion

6.4 Separation within the sublimer

The ZrF₄ and HfF₄ masses remaining in the sublimer are shown in Figure 6-8. These are for a sublimation temperature of 790 °C. The model times out when the ZrF₄ or HfF₄ is less than 1/100th of the initial mass. From this figure it is seen that, should the sublimer be removed from the oven at a time when most of the sample has sublimed, the sublimer residue will be rich in Hf.

Zr/Hf mole ratios for the sublimer residue ranged between 86 (raw ZrF₄) and 30, depending on the sublimation temperature and duration. From Figure 6-9 it is evident that the sublimer residue becomes “Hf rich” with time due to the fact that HfF₄ sublimes at a lower rate than ZrF₄. It is important to note that separation between Zr and Hf is achieved within the sublimer. A lower ratio is indicative of a higher Hf content in the residue, which implies that the sublimer must be left in the oven for as long as possible, but must be removed once most of the ZrF₄ has sublimed.
Chapter 6: Results and discussion

Figure 6-9: Zr/Hf mole ratio of the sublimer residue as a function of time and temperature

Comparing the linear section of the Zr/Hf mole ratio data in Figure 6-9 with that obtained from the model indicates that the model predicts too high a sublimation rate for the HfF$_4$, resulting in a lower Zr/Hf mole ratio. Model predictions were out by a factor of 1.6 at 740 °C, 1.7 at 760 °C and 2.8 at 790 °C. The slope of the linear section of the Zr/Hf mole ratio versus time (Figure 6-9) was plotted as a function of the sublimation temperature. These are shown for both the experimental and modelled results (Figure 6-10).

From this figure it is seen that the model predictions are even worse at higher temperatures. The vapour pressure data for ZrF$_4$ was taken from four sources with a standard error of 48.2 and 0.055 for the constants A and B respectively. One explanation for the modelled Zr/Hf being lower may be that the vapour pressure data (single literature source) are possibly wrong, which can be true due to the strong dependency of the vapour pressure on temperature.
6.5 Separation within the desublimer

It is assumed that the sublimed ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ desublimes into a crystal structure in which the Zr and Hf occur in identical crystallographic positions as with the starting material.

Desublimation has the disadvantage of low product yield, which is caused by the formation of aerosols at a high super-cooling level of the source vapour. Due to this, the decision was made to take triplicate sublimer masses of 15 g each, once the others had been exposed to the sublimation temperature for 30 minutes each, thereby to increase the total mass sublimed and also the total mass desublimed. The mass desublimed on the desublimer was sampled at several intervals to determine whether there was a difference in the Zr/Hf ratio with the length of the desublimer. Figure 6-11 illustrates the desublimer with desublimed Zr(Hf)F$_4$ and the respective sampling point.

![Figure 6-11: Sample positions on the desublimer](image)

Here $X_0$ is the tip of the desublimer closest to the heating zone and along the length of the desublimer are $X_1$ through to $X_5$ which are 100 mm apart, with $X_1$ being the first 10 millimetres on the desublimer. The sublimation temperatures investigated were 700 °C, 740 °C and 790 °C.

6.5.1 Experimental results

Figure 6-12 gives the Zr/Hf mole ratio of the collective mass obtained throughout on the desublimer.
It is clear that the sublimation temperature does have an effect on the separation achieved in the desublimer. A lower sublimation temperature will result in a higher mole ratio (better separation) of the collective desublimed mass.

The Zr/Hf mole ratios at $X_0$ differed from experiment to experiment with no repeatable results and are therefore not shown. No results are shown for the Zr/Hf mole ratios from $X_4$ onward since there were not enough data collected for analysis due to the amount of desublimed product which varied from experiment to experiment. The Zr/Hf mole ratios at $X_1$, $X_2$ and $X_3$ at the respective temperatures are shown in Figure 6-13. Again it is shown that there is a definite relationship between the mole ratio and the temperature, where a lower temperature gives better separation.

The mole ratio range (span) at lower temperatures is also larger, indicating better separation across the length of the desublimer. The mole ratio at 700 °C ranges from 239 at $X_1$ up to 194 at $X_3$ giving a
range of 45, whereas at 790 °C the mole ratio range is approximately 27 between \( X_1 \) and \( X_3 \), indicating that better separation is achieved across the length of the desublimer at lower temperatures.

A plot of the slopes (in Figure 6-13) versus temperature for \( X_1 \) to \( X_3 \) is shown in Figure 6-14. This may be used to predict the mole ratios at different positions on the desublimer with the assumption of linearity.

![Figure 6-14: Linear relationship for the slope of the Zr/Hf mole ratio versus temperature graphs as a function of the position on the desublimer](image)

These results may be used to predict separation further along the length of the desublumer.

Approximately 50 % of the sublimed mass desublimes at a sublimation temperature of 700 °C and 740 °C, whereas 70 % of the sublimed mass desublimes at 790 °C. The desublimed mass as a function of the sublimation temperature is shown in Figure 6-15.

![Figure 6-15: The amount of mass that desublimes is a function of the sublimation temperature](image)
6.5.2 Model predictions

Figure 6-16 shows the experimental and model results obtained for separation along the length of the desublimer. Model predictions indicate better separation with mole ratios typically higher by a factor of 1.5 at 700 °C and 740 °C and 1.2 at 790 °C.

![Graph showing model predictions and experimental results](image)

Figure 6-16: Experimental and model results obtained for separation along the length of the desublimer

Model predictions indicated that approximately 55 % of the sublimed mass desublimes over the 300 mm length, irrespective of the temperature.

6.5.3 Bulk gas temperature

The bulk gas temperature measured was 500 °C at X₁ (Figure 6-17) at a sublimation temperature of 790 °C.

![Schematic of sublimation and desublimation](image)

Figure 6-17: Schematic of sublimer and desublimer inside tube furnace
The modelled result for the cooling of the bulk gas in the annulus section is shown in Figure 6-18. Here the modelled result indicates that the bulk temperature decreases quite drastically over the length on the annulus section of the desublimer.

Comparing the modelled versus the experimentally measured temperature at $X_1$, it is seen that the modelled value is out by less than 17%. At $X_2$ the measured value was, however, $\sim 100$ °C, which is well below the modelled values obtained. This implies that there are other factors that need to be included in the model to account for these temperature differences, which may have a huge or a minute effect on the Zr/Hf mole ratios obtained.

### 6.6 Modelled partial pressures

#### 6.6.1 Partial pressures of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ across the sublimer and desublimer section

The partial pressure of the ZrF$_4$ in the sublimer and desublimer changes with both length and time as shown in Figure 6-19 for ZrF$_4$ and in Figure 6-20 for HfF$_4$. The partial pressures of the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ in the bulk gas increase in the sublimer section, after which they decrease as desublimation proceeds along the length of the desublimer. It is further shown that the partial pressures decrease as time proceeds. These pressures are shown for a sublimation temperature of 790 °C.
As with ZrF$_4$, the same is shown for HfF$_4$, but the reciprocal is true, namely where the partial pressure increases with time.

**6.6.2 Partial pressures exiting the sublimer section**

The partial pressures at which ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ exit the sublimer section and enter the desublimation section are shown as a function of time at 790 °C in Figure 6-21 and at 760 °C in Figure 6-22.
Figure 6-21: Partial pressures of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ exiting the sublimer section at 790 °C

Figure 6-22: Partial pressures of ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$ exiting the sublimer section at 760 °C

From Figure 6-21 and Figure 6-22 it can be seen that the sublimation temperature has a big influence on the partial pressures obtained in the sublimer. To achieve better separation it would be advantageous to remove the sublimer from the heating zone before the partial pressure of the ZrF$_4$ becomes too low and that of the HfF$_4$ becomes too high. For example, looking at a partial pressure change of 20 % implies that at 790 °C the partial pressure change is ~ 20 % within the first 30 minutes, whereas at 760 °C the change is 20 % after 60 minutes.

Noting these differences may be valuable in determining the optimal temperature and residence time for the sublimation process.
6.7 Number of sublimation steps determined by the model

The starting Hf concentration in the Zr(Hf)F$_4$ bulk material is 1.27 % (1.67 % HfF$_4$) with a zircon content of 6.7 %. After the first sublimation step, the model result for the collective bulk mass obtained from the desublimer contains no zircon and the Hf concentration decreases to a certain extent.

It was shown that lower temperatures give better separation but require a longer sublimation time to achieve the same degree of sublimation. The number of steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf were determined at both 790 and 760 °C with a sublimation time of 30 minutes.

From Figure 6-1 it can be seen that the fraction sublimed for 30 minutes at 790 °C is the same as that sublimed for 60 minutes at 760 °C. The number of steps required to obtain a Hf content of less than 100 ppm were calculated for a 60 minutes’ residence time at 760 °C and the three scenarios compared.

Note that the calculations were based on the results obtained from a single sublimation step. This implies that the mass collected from the desublimer was not sublimed to account for a second or third step. The masses collected were simply too small to enable us to do second, third and more sublimation steps. The results collected from this first sublimation step were compared to the results of the model and these comparisons were used to estimate the extent of separation for second, third and more sublimation steps. This was therefore a theoretical study to determine the number of sublimation steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf in the product.

There are many other factors that can influence the results, for example the particle surface area before and after sublimation and the amount of oxyfluorides present after collection from the desublimer.

6.7.1 Model run at 790 °C sublimation temperature and 30 minutes’ sublimation time

The model was run at a sublimation temperature of 790 °C for several repetitive times. Each time a new value was entered for the Hf concentration (i.e. HfF$_4$) in the bulk material with the assumption of removal of the sublimer after 30 minutes. This was done to determine the number of steps required.
Assuming that the modelled Zr/Hf mole ratio is 1.2 times that of the actual mole ratio at 790 °C, the implication is that the Hf result after each step needs to be multiplied by 1.2 before feeding this input to the next step. The results obtained (Figure 6-23) indicated that 8 steps would be required to reduce the Hf concentration to less than 100 ppm.

Figure 6-23: Number of calculated sublimation steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf at a sublimation temperature of 790 °C and removal of the sublimer after 30 minutes

At 790 °C it was found that approximately 70 % of the sublimed mass could be collected in the desublimer. This implies that 18.5 kg would be required to produce 1 kg of nuclear grade (< 10 ppm Hf) ZrF₄.

6.7.2 Model run at 760 °C sublimation temperature and 30 minutes’ sublimation time

At a sublimation temperature of 760 °C and removal of the sublimer after 30 minutes with the assumption that the modelled Zr/Hf mole ratio is 1.5 times that of the actual mole ratio at 760 °C, 7 steps are required to reduce the Hf concentration to less than 100 ppm (Figure 6-24).
Figure 6-24: Number of calculated sublimation steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf at a sublimation temperature of 760 °C and removal of the sublimer after 30 minutes

Note that lower sublimation temperatures give better separation but require longer sublimation times to obtain the same amount of sublimed material.

### 6.7.3 Model run at 760 °C sublimation temperature and 60 minutes’ sublimation time

At a sublimation temperature of 760 °C and removal of the sublimer after 60 minutes with the assumption that the modelled Zr/Hf mole ratio is 1.5 times that of the actual mole ratio at 760 °C, 10 steps are required to reduce the Hf concentration to less than 100 ppm (Figure 6-25).

Figure 6-25: Number of sublimation steps required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf with a sublimation temperature of 760 °C and removal of the sublimer after 60 minutes
It must, however, be kept in mind that less mass was desublimed at the lower temperature, which may influence the yield if a lower operating temperature is chosen (Figure 6-15).

From the above results it is clear that fewer steps are required to obtain < 100 ppm Hf at lower temperatures with removal of the sublimer after 30 minutes.

However, at 760 °C the area-dependent rate is 0.873 g·m⁻²·s⁻¹, whereas at 790 °C the rate is 1.85 g·m⁻²·s⁻¹, which implies that the sublimation reactor (and desublimer) must be 2.1 times larger to achieve the same rate as at 790 °C to benefit from using one sublimation step fewer at 760 °C.
Chapter 7:  Conclusions and recommendations

7.1  Conclusions

Sublimation provides a dry process for separation which has the added advantage of producing much less waste, especially liquid wastes, which have undesirable environmental effects. Little information is available on the sublimation separation of Zr and Hf, especially in the fluoride form and most studies in the literature involve sublimation under vacuum conditions.

Experimental results indicate that separation is achieved in both the sublimer and across the length of the desublimer. A downside to the sublimation was sintering of the cake which negatively influences the sublimation kinetics.

A sublimation and desublimation model was developed. The model was used to calculate the sublimation and desublimation rates of both the ZrF$_4$ and HfF$_4$, which enabled the calculation of Zr/Hf mole ratios within the sublimer residue and across the length of the desublimer.

The data from the model were compared to the experimental results. Good comparisons of the sublimation rates were shown at temperatures of 740 °C and 760 °C, but the sublimation rates at temperatures of 790 °C were over-predicted. These could be due to the non-equilibrium nature of the Zr(Hf)F$_4$ sublimation process and the interaction of impurities at higher temperatures.

The over-prediction of the sublimation rates were used as input to the desubliming stage and therefore modelled results were worse for the desublimation when compared to experimental results obtained.

In both the experimental and modelled results for the separation in the desublimer, it was found that a lower sublimation temperature would result in a higher mole ratio (better separation), both within the sublimer residue and across the length of the desublimer. Optimal temperature selection is therefore imperative with respect to operational cost and material of construction.

Further optimisation of the sublimation process in an inert atmosphere may be considered based purely on the extent of separation achieved in both the sublimer and desublimer. Literature indicated that pure Zr(Hf)F$_4$ gives higher rates of sublimation and therefore it would be interesting to test the efficiency of a second step.
7.2 Recommendations

From this work it was shown that lower sublimation temperatures resulted in better separation but with lower sublimation rates. Vacuum sublimation, however, gives higher fluxes and requires lower temperatures. It is therefore recommended that this study be repeated under vacuum conditions to determine the extent of separation that can be achieved along the length of the desublimer. To stress the importance of this the recommendation, it must be noted that sublimation provides dry methods with no liquid waste. It may require fewer steps, which is less labour intensive and lower capital costs than other commercial technologies. The major drawbacks are the high energy requirements to obtain the high separation temperatures, resulting in expensive construction materials.

For the current system, the following recommendations are made:

- Due to the sintering of the cake, it is recommended that a mixer be added in the sublimation step.

- To ensure adequate heat transfer in the desublimer, it is recommended that a continuous scraper be installed to scrape the desublimed product from the surface of the desublimer.

- Due to the separation achieved along the length of the desublimer, it is recommended that the desublimed product be removed at predetermined positions along the length of the desublimer.

- Due to the differences in separation achieved at different sublimation temperatures, residence times and along the length of the desublimer, it is recommended that a cascade of sublimer/desublimer systems be developed, each at different operating conditions. Figure 7-1 shows such a system.
Recommended alterations and/or additions to increase the purity of the samples as well as the rate of sublimation:

- A pre-dry step of the salt is necessary to avoid the formation of metal oxides and metal oxyfluorides (Yeatts and Rainey, 1965).
- The sweep gas could be replaced by fluorine gas, but this would add complications.
- A slow temperature increase up to 500 °C under vacuum (Yeatts and Rainey, 1965) would ensure homogeneous heating. One reason for doing this is due to possible heat transfer problems, which would keep the temperature gradient in the sample as low as possible.
- A system can be developed in which baffles could be added to prevent the entrainment of ZrO$_2$ and ZrOF$_2$ during sublimation of ZrF$_4$ (Yeatts and Rainey, 1965).
- Compounds could be added to provide a “gettering” activity in order to reduce the number of steps required to obtain reactor-grade ZrF$_4$ (Solov'ev & Malyutina, 2002b). The details are described in Section 2.3.1.
- The addition of pulverized metallic scrap to the ZrF$_4$ mixtures can give a higher rate of sublimation (Solov'ev and Malyutina, 2002).

Inadequate information was found on the sublimation rate of ZrF$_4$ or HfF$_4$ in an inert atmosphere. The sublimation rate is assumed to be dependent on several factors, including temperature, available...
sublimation area, pressure, composition, particle size, surface area of the sample, crystal structure, hygroscopic nature of the sample and the type of equipment used. No information was available on the effect of particle size, the surface area of the sample, the crystal structure and the hygroscopic nature of the sample would have on the desired separation. It is therefore recommended that these parameters and their effect on the sublimation rate be studied.
Chapter 8: References

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