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Interactions near the triple-phase boundaries metal/glass/air in planar solid oxide fuel cells

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ABSTRACT

The possible interactions near the triple-phase boundaries (TPB) metal/glass/air, and their effects on joint strength are investigated. Two types of samples (joined couples and glass coated coupons) are prepared with the coupon of AISI 430 (nickel plated and uncoated) and a slurry of compliant silicate sealing glass (SCN-1). The joined and coated samples are heated at 850 °C for 1000 h in air. The joined couples are cooled using two different schedules and then tested in uniaxial tension. For investigating the metal-oxides precipitation procedure in glass near the TPB, glass coated coupons are either cooled at the rate of 5 °C min⁻¹ or water-quenched from aging temperature. The mechanical test results and microstructural observations show that the spread and accelerated breakaway oxidation near TPB, which is due to continuous oxidation and dissolution of ferritic stainless steel (FSS) into the glass, leads to decreased and scattered low temperature joint strengths.

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Introduction

Solid oxide fuel cell (SOFC) is a device that generates electricity directly from chemical reactions between fuel and oxidant. The planar SOFCs (pSOFCs) with metallic interconnects can be categorized as the second generation SOFCs after the sealless tubular cells and the planar cells with ceramic interconnects. Metallic interconnects have low fabrication costs, better thermal and electrical conductivity, and higher toughness. One of the major challenges for commercializing pSOFCs concerns sealant materials. These sealants must prevent fuel–oxidant mixing, provide electrical insulation of the stack layers and also have limited interaction with other components for long times (5000–40,000 h) at high temperatures (between 600 °C and 1000 °C) [1].

In the last two decades, extensive research has been carried out on interactions between glasses (or glass-ceramics) and ferritic stainless steels (FSSs) as sealant and interconnect, respectively. It has been shown that the extent and nature of the metal/glass interactions in the interior region of the joints are not the same as the edge region. Yang et al. [2,3] studied the interaction between barium-containing glass and FSS. They found that the detrimental barium chromate (BaCrO₄) phase is formed near the triple-phase boundaries (TPB) metal/glass/air and not at the interior metal/glass interfaces. Haanappel and Menzler et al. [4–9] investigated the interactions between different glass sealant–alloy combinations under different atmospheric conditions (air, humidified hydrogen and humidified hydrogen/air dual atmosphere). They reported that during exposing at least one side of glass–ceramics containing minor amounts of PbO to

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humidified hydrogen, excessive corrosion of the FSS may occur, which eventually results in a short-circuiting between adjacent interconnector plates. It appeared that excessive internal Cr oxidation of FSS often occurred near the hydrogen side and sometimes was accompanied by external Fe-oxide formation (a so-called breakaway oxidation) near the air side. Similar observations of Ba or Sr chromates formation [10–12] and breakaway oxidation [13–17] at the sealing edges exposed to air and also internal Cr oxidation near the hydrogen side [11,18–20] have also been reported in several other studies.

In addition to modification of glass and FSS compositions [21–23], many other efforts have been made on the modification of FSS surface to reduce the detrimental interactions, including pre-oxidation [16,24], aluminizing [25] and applying protective coating [26,27]. Recently, the behavior of nickel layer on the FSS surface has also been investigated under SOFC conditions [28–35].

Our recent work [36] revealed some severe corrosion of FSS near TPB of AISI 430/SCN-1 glass/air during a short heat-treatment (850 °C/100 h) which could be lessened by an intermediate nickel layer. However, inward diffusion of a portion of Ni through FSS led to rapid loss of adhesion strength all over the joined area. Although non-uniform diffusion of Ni into FSS (and thus non-uniform thermal stress generation) was scrutinized, a more comprehensive experimental study of interaction near TPB is still needed.

In this paper, attention has been focused on the TPB of AISI 430/SCN-1 glass/air to evaluate chemical and mechanical aspects of interactions at 850 °C for longer duration of heat treatment (1000 h).

Experimental

Materials and sample preparation

Commercial alkali silicate glass (SCN-1, Par-e-tavous, Khorasan-e-razavi, Iran) was used. This glass contains alkaline earth elements, mainly in the form of BaO (8.23 mol%) and CaO (3.34 mol%), alkalis of K₂O (10.0 mol%) and Na₂O (7.3 mol%), Al₂O₃ (2.8 mol%), and some impurities (less than 1%) of Fe, Mg and Ti with the balance of SiO₂. The glass transition temperature (T_g), softening point (T_d), and coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) were about 470 °C, 550 °C and $11 \times 10^{-6} \text{ } ^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$, respectively. The details of SCN-1 behavior as a compliant sealing glass for solid oxide fuel cell applications has been reported earlier [37–40]. SCN-1 as a non-crystallizing compliant sealing glass allows us to focus on interfacial interactions for seal strength investigation.

AISI 430 is a commercial FSS (Hardox, Oxelösund, Sweden) containing Cr (17.5 wt%), Ni (0.13 wt%), C (0.05 wt%), Mn (0.25 wt%), Cu (0.13 wt%) and Si (0.15 wt%) with the balance of Fe. In this study, FSS sheets with a thickness of 0.5 mm were used in two states of 10 μm thick Ni-plated and uncoated. The coating with thickness of 10 μm is chosen because it has been reported that FSS with 8–10 μm thick nickel coating performs better under SOFC atmospheres [32,34]. Detailed information about the electroplating procedure is described in Ref. [36].

For tensile tests, FSS/glass/FSS sandwiches (joined couples) were prepared. The thickness of glass after joining was 0.5 ± 0.05 mm. To prepare samples, a given volume of glass slurry was applied onto the FSS coupons surface with dimensions of 1×1 cm². The slurry was a mixture of glass powder and additives (0.2 wt.% borax, 0.2 wt.% sodium nitrate, 1 wt.% kaolin, and 0.5 wt.% silica) dispersed in deionized water by ball-mill treatment. After applying the slurry, the samples were dried at 70 °C for 15 min. The dried samples were then thermally aged at 850 °C for 1000 h in air. The heating and cooling rates were about $5 \text{ } ^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$. Significant thermal stress reduction at the glass/metal interface can be achieved by reducing the cooling rate through the annealing range of glass [41]. Regarding to approximate annealing temperature for SCN-1 (447 °C) [42], some samples were cooled from 450 °C to room temperature at a rate of $1 \text{ } ^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$.

In addition to the joined couples, some samples were prepared in the form of glass coated FSS coupons. These samples were either cooled at the rate of $5 \text{ } ^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ or water-quenched from aging temperature for investigating the metal-oxides precipitation process in glass near the TPB. The thickness of glass coating was 0.3 ± 0.5 mm.

Mechanical testing and microstructural characterization

For joint strength tests, the joined couples were glued to a self-alignment fixture. The assembly was then tested in uniaxial tension with a cross-head speed of 0.5 mm min^{-1} in ambient conditions. Tensile tests were carried out using a Hounsfield H10KS with a 1000 N load cell. Detailed information about test principles and equipment is given in Ref. [36]. For each condition, 20 samples were tested, and results were analyzed using two-parameter Weibull probabilistic equation which is shown below

$$P_f = 1 - \exp \left[- \left(\frac{\sigma}{\sigma_0} \right)^m \right]$$

where P_f is the failure probability for an applied stress σ , σ_0 is the Weibull characteristic strength (which corresponds to $P_f = 63.2\%$) and m is the Weibull modulus. Here, the Weibull modulus m is a measure of the degree of strength data scatter. The Weibull parameters (σ_0 and m) were calculated according to ASTM C1239-13.

Some of the samples were also mounted in epoxy and then sectioned and polished for interfacial characterization using optical (Olympus BX51M) and scanning electron microscopes (SEM VEGA \ \ TESCAN-XMU).

Results and discussion

Joint strength

Fracture surface analysis revealed that crack propagation mainly occurs along the glass/metal interface. It means that the joint strength is controlled by glass/metal adhesion. The two-parameter Weibull distribution of fracture strength for the joined couples is shown in Fig. 1. The joint couples with Ni-plated and uncoated coupons are denoted as N and S,

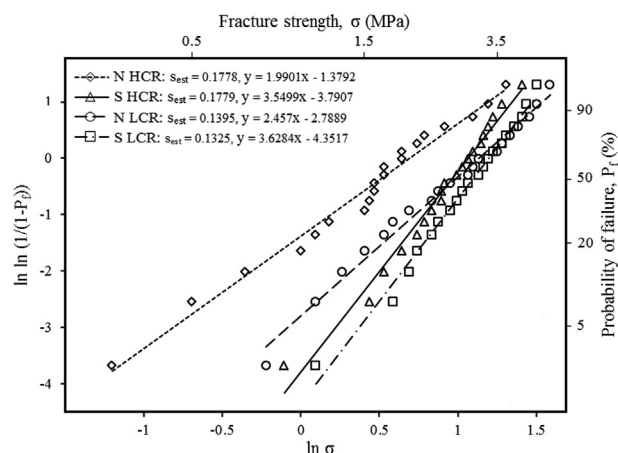


Fig. 1 – Weibull distribution of fracture strengths for N (Ni-plated) and S (uncoated) joint couples prepared at cooling rates of $5\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C min}^{-1}$ (HCR) and $1\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C min}^{-1}$ (LCR). Here, s_{est} denotes the standard deviation of the estimate for linear regression.

respectively. As it is seen, S joint couples exhibited a greater strength than N ones. Also it can be seen in Fig. 1 that the reduction in cooling rate in order to increase the strength of N joint couples was more effective than for S ones. These observations confirm the presence of significant thermal stresses at the Ni-plated FSS/glass interface. Indeed, diffusion of a portion of the Ni coating into FSS during aging leads to extension of unstable austenite zones near the interface. During cooling, the austenite to ferrite transformation is followed by a significant volume expansion in a short temperature range which leads to increased residual stress or crack formation at the interface.

It can be seen in Table 1 that all m values, especially for more rapidly cooled N joint couples, are low. Whilst we observed lower scatter as well as higher value for fracture strength of joint couples which heat treated for shorter durations [36]. Weibull modulus m is related to uniformity of the microstructure, including flaws, grain size, and inclusions [43]. Here, the wide distributions of strength and hence low m value can be related to the flaws and inclusions caused by detrimental interactions near TPB, and could also be intensified by non-uniform residual stresses at the Ni-plated FSS/glass interfaces.

Chemical interactions

Fig. 2 shows the metal/glass interfaces away from TPB. It is clearly evident that Cr diffused to surfaces of both uncoated and Ni-plated FSS and caused formation of a Cr-rich oxide at the interfaces. Although a slight diffusion of Cr into glass ($2.4\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ and $1.2\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ for uncoated and Ni-plated samples respectively) can be observed, there is no evidence of Fe and Ni presence in glass. Also, the visible mild corrosion of either uncoated or Ni-plated FSS (with about 5- and 10- μm -thick oxide layers respectively) demonstrates the limited metal/glass interactions along the interior interfaces.

The limitation in interactions is due to lack of access to oxygen from air. In the absence of oxygen, Cr and Mn continuously diffuse into the interface and form an insoluble (Cr, Mn) oxide by reduction of thermodynamically less stable oxides. In addition to surface oxides, the dissolved metal oxides and some of modifier oxides of glass can also be reduced and precipitate from glass. Therefore such redox reactions can gradually deplete the glass of dissolved Fe and Ni oxides [36].

Fig. 3a and b shows the cross-sectional micrographs of uncoated FSS/glass interface near TPB. It is seen that FSS was severely corroded (to a depth of $66\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ relative to interior metal/glass interface) in the vicinity of SCN-1 glass and also a large amount of Fe-rich nodules grew outwardly and were distributed in the glass. Fig. 3c reveals a low Cr concentration gradient in FSS near the corroded region.

The observations demonstrate the occurrence of break-away oxidation underneath the glass near TPB. The break-away oxidation tends to take place when Cr consumption at the alloy surface is faster than Cr diffusion from the bulk. Under these conditions, Cr is depleted down to the critical concentration (16 wt.%) in the underlying alloy. Thus protective chromia layer can no longer be retained and consequently external Fe-rich oxide starts to form [16,17,45].

Fig. 4a and b shows uncoated FSS/glass interfaces near TPB for glass coated coupons cooled at a rate of $5\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C min}^{-1}$ and water-quenched, respectively. The flake-like particles of Fe-oxides are seen near the outer surface of glass in both coupons. The higher magnification images (Fig. 4c and d) reveal that, unlike the slow cooled coupon, there are some finer flakes amidst the coarse ones in the quenched coupon. Also, no Cr-diffusion into this region of glass can be detected by EDS analysis of both coupons (Fig. 4e and f).

The evidences indicate that a significant amount of Fe-oxide can be dissolved in glass near TPB during aging and then precipitate during cooling. The dissolved metal-oxides in glass normally tend to crystalize during cooling through

Table 1 – Weibull parameters (σ_0 and m), average strength (σ_{ave}), standard deviation (s), and uncertainty (u) of measurement with a confidence interval of 95%.

Joined couple	σ_0 (MPa)	$s(\sigma_0)^a$ (MPa)	$u(\sigma_0)$ (MPa)	m	$s(m)^a$	σ_{ave} (MPa)	$s(\sigma_{\text{ave}})$ (MPa)	$u(\sigma_{\text{ave}})$ (MPa)
N HCR	2.0	± 0.2	± 0.1	2.0	± 0.4	1.8	± 0.9	± 0.4
S HCR	2.9	± 0.2	± 0.1	3.5	± 0.8	2.6	± 0.8	± 0.4
N LCR	3.1	± 0.3	± 0.1	2.5	± 0.5	2.8	± 1.2	± 0.5
S LCR	3.3	± 0.2	± 0.1	3.6	± 0.8	3.0	± 0.9	± 0.4

^a Details on the calculation are given in Ref. [44].

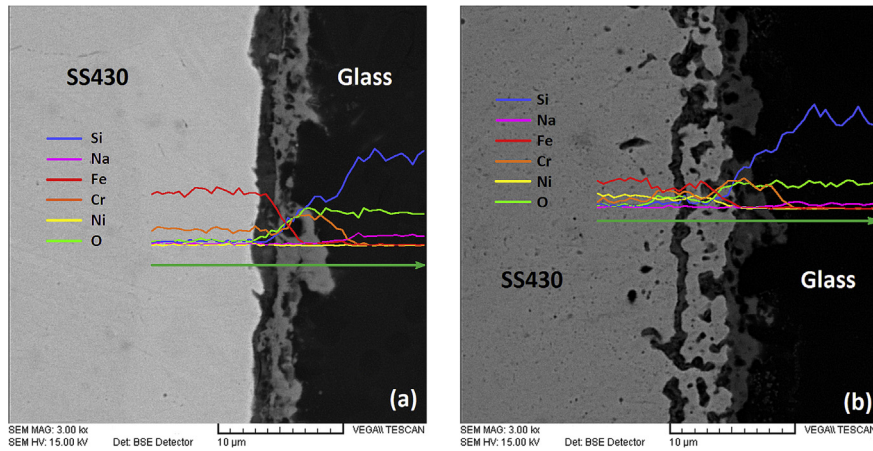


Fig. 2 – EDS line scans across the interior SCN-1 glass interface with uncoated (a) and Ni-plated (b) AISI 430 for joint couples aged at 850 °C for 1000 h in air followed by cooling at a rate of 5 °C min⁻¹.

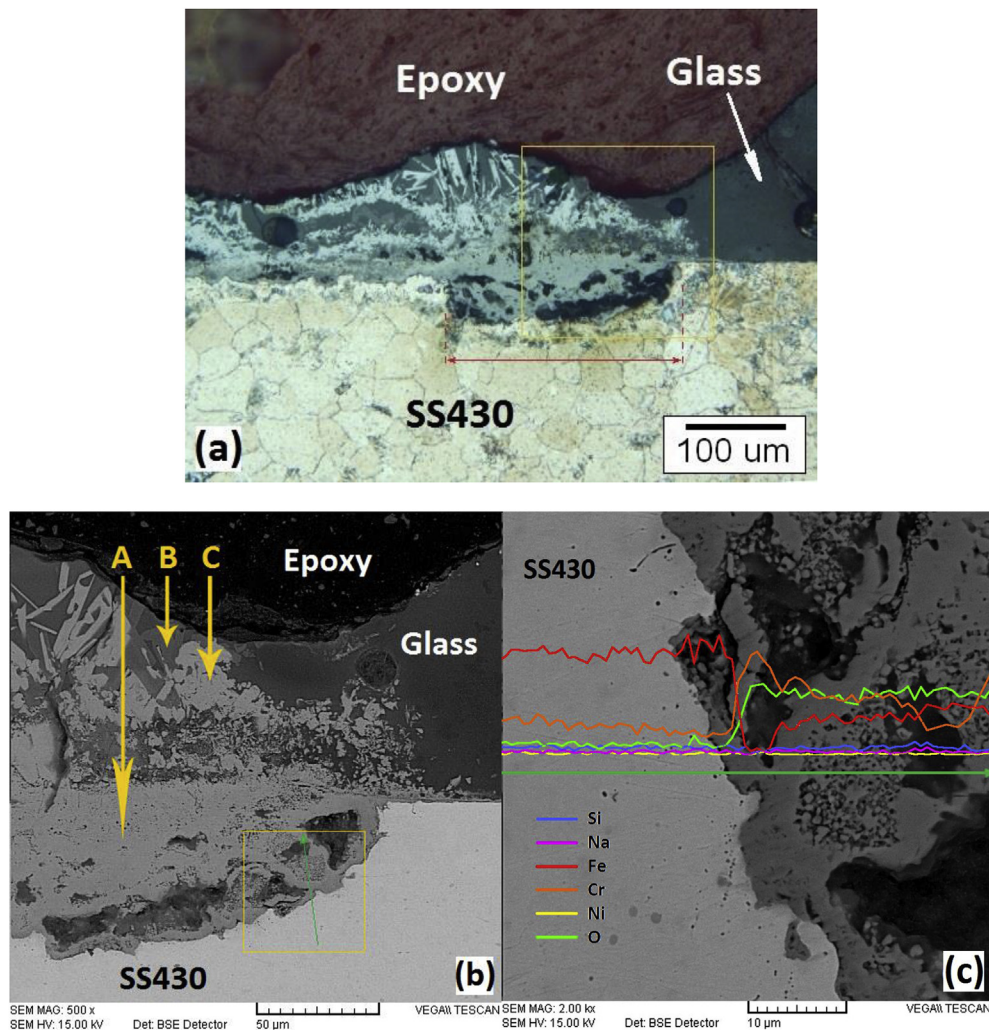


Fig. 3 – Optical (a) and Backscattered electron SEM micrograph of uncoated AISI 430/SCN-1 glass interface near TPB after heat treating at 850 °C for 1000 h in air (b), EDS line scan across the uncorroded/corroded boundary in the area indicated in Fig. 3a with a 90° clockwise rotation (c). A: (Fe, Cr) oxide, B: Fe-oxide underneath the glass, C: Fe-oxide.

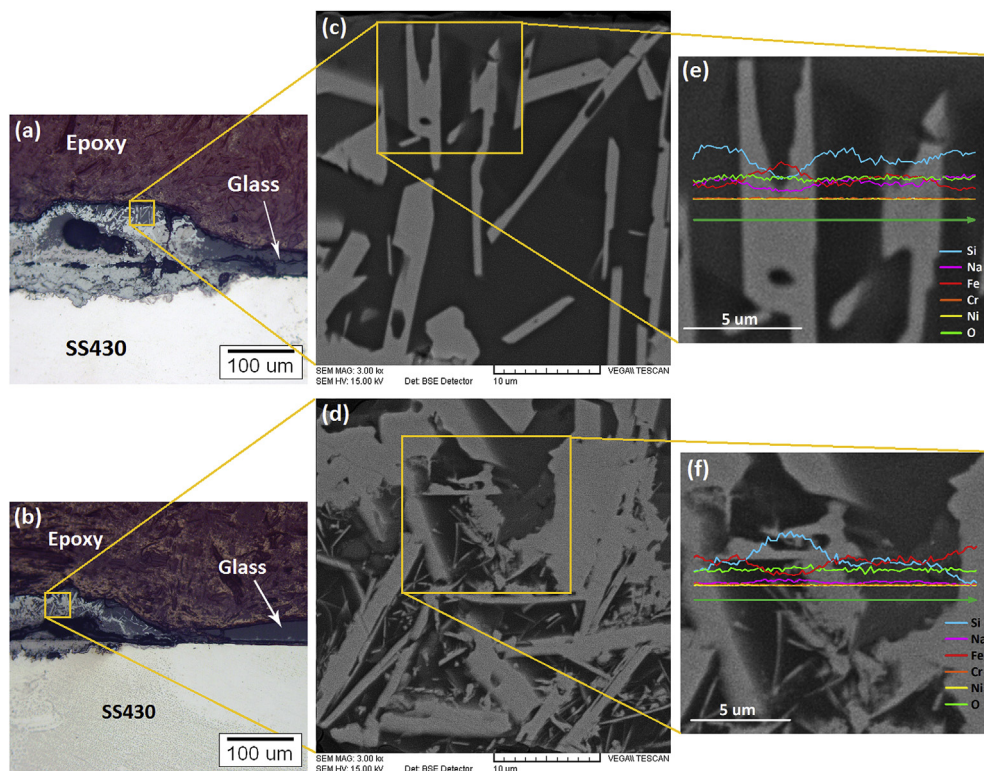


Fig. 4 – Cross-sectional optical micrographs of uncoated AISI 430/SCN-1 glass interface near TPB after heat treating at 850 °C for 1000 h in air followed by cooling at a rate of 5 °C min⁻¹ (a) and water-quenching (b) to ambient temperature. Magnified views of area indicated in a (c) and b (d). EDS line scans in the area indicated in c (e) and d (f).

nucleation and growth procedure. According to thermodynamic principle, nucleation process tends to be heterogeneous and the nuclei usually form on the interface which is the reason why the flakes exist as parts of metal substrate [46,47]. The increased cooling rate leads to formation of a large number of homogeneous nuclei and consequently decreases the size of final flakes.

At TPBs, the activity of oxygen is high due to more access to air, thus the competition for oxygen is diminished [48,49]. Therefore, a high amount of (Fe, Cr) oxide can be continuously produced at the FSS surfaces [50]. Compared to Cr₂O₃, the Fe-oxide has a higher tendency to be dissolved in the glass [51]; hence, it leads to continuous breakdown of surface oxide layer. This phenomenon increases the Cr consumption at the FSS surface and results in breakaway oxidation. The resulting voluminous products lead to local bulging of the FSS and push away the glass from the surface. Therefore, oxygen penetrates more readily into metal/glass interface from air, and in this way the breakaway oxidation spreads to interior interfaces [5–7]. As it is seen in Fig. 3a, the intensified corrosion has reached its maximum (66 μm depth) at the zone indicated by red (in the web version) line, where there is enough access to oxygen as well as plenty of glass for, respectively, oxidation and dissolution of FSS.

As discussed by other authors [13,15] the enrichment of Na in the oxide scale would suggest the formation of Na₂CrO₄. The high vapor pressure of this alkali chromate can result in its vaporization which can increase the Cr consumption at the

FSS surface. However, the results of the present study showed that there was no trace of Na in oxidation products. Bram et al. [16] reported that pre-oxidation leads to the homogeneous formation of a protective chromia-based oxide scale on the FSS surface, which reliably avoids breakaway oxidation. The pre-oxidation in a reducing atmosphere with low oxygen activity in order to form of a Fe-free chromia layer on the FSS surface can be the subject of further research.

Fig. 5a shows the cross-sectional optical micrograph of Ni-plated FSS/glass interface near TPB after etching with marble reagent. The diffusion of Ni through the ferritic structure (mustard grains) leads to an increase in the thickness of austenite phase (bright white layer) to about 85 μm. The depth of corrosion underneath the glass has reached up to 23 μm relative to interior metal/glass interface, and corrosion products are gradually decreased from metal/air to interior metal/glass interfaces. Therefore, it can be said that there is no intensified corrosion of FSS near TPB. The chemical composition of flake-like particles (spot#1 in Fig. 5b) which have grown towards the glass is given in Table 2. The EDS analysis across the corrosion products near TPB (Fig. 5c) confirms that the Ni-coating was completely oxidized and some Cr-rich oxide (indicated by green (in the web version) arrows) formed underneath and inside it. Also it can be seen that some dendrites of (Fe, Ni) oxide (indicated by red arrow) formed in glass, next to the coating.

The Ni-rich dendrites and flakes and also Ni-free glass show that Ni-oxide can be dissolved in glass and precipitates

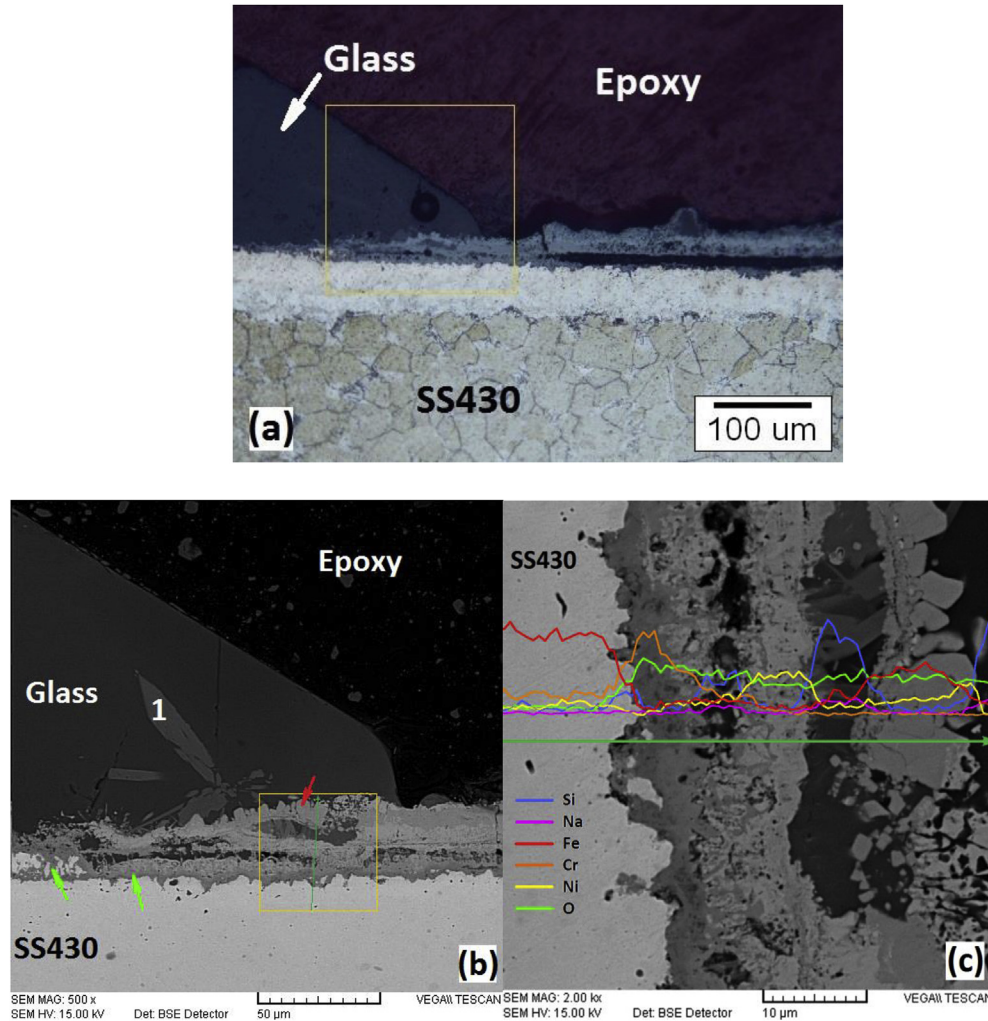


Fig. 5 – Optical (a) and Backscattered electron SEM micrograph of Ni-plated AISI 430/SCN-1 glass interface near TPB after heat treating at 850 °C for 1000 h in air (b), EDS line scan across the interfaces in the area indicated in Fig. 4a with a 90° clockwise rotation (c). EDS of spot#1 is given in Table 2.

with other elements through a nucleation and growth procedure. However, the Ni-oxide has a low tendency to be dissolved in glass [51] therefore the oxidation of Ni-coating leads to formation of a semi-stable layer of Ni-oxide on the FSS surface. This oxide layer decelerates Cr-diffusion into metal/glass interface and thus prevents the rapid extension of Cr-depleted region. As a result, Ni-coating inhibits the accelerated breakaway oxidation underneath the glass.

Mismatches in CTE can result in generation of undesirable residual stresses upon cooling. As it seen in Table 3, Ni-oxide has a relatively high CTE mismatch with SCN-1 glass and FFS as well as other oxides. Higher CTE of Ni-oxide results in tensile residual stress during cooling and consequently can lead to crack formation at the interfaces. Therefore, in addition to reduction of effective interface for load bearing,

corrosion products increase the CTE mismatches along the interface and lead to decreased and scattered joint strengths. Shaigan et al. [30,31] reported that addition of LaCrO₃ particles to Ni-coating may improve the oxidation resistance and reduce the corrosion products.

The acid–base reactions are the main cause of interaction between glass and metal in the presence of oxygen [59]. The metal oxides can be dissolved in oxide glasses by this type of reactions. In general, the intensity and rate of the acid–base reactions is highest when the glass is more acidic [60].

Table 2 – Chemical composition (at.%) of spot#1 in Fig. 4a.

O	Na	Si	Ca	Fe	Ni
68.91	2.74	14.89	5.68	3.52	4.26

Table 3 – Coefficients of thermal expansion (CTE).

Material	CTE ($\times 10^{-6} \text{ }^\circ\text{C}^{-1}$)	Ref.
SCN-1	11	[37]
Fe ₂ O ₃	14.9	[52]
Fe ₃ O ₄	>9.2	[53,54]
FeO	12.1	[52]
NiO	13.9–17.1	[52,55,56]
Cr ₂ O ₃	5.7–9.6	[57]
AISI 430	12.5	[58]

Therefore, compared to Cr_2O_3 as a neutral oxide, FeO and NiO as two basic oxides are more readily dissolved in silicate glass. Accordingly, the less acidic glasses are better choices for reducing the metal/glass interaction near TPB.

Conclusions

1. The spread and accelerated breakaway oxidation near the triple-phase boundaries (TPB) AISI 430/SCN-1 glass/air reduces the effective interface for load bearing and also causes increased stress concentration during loading. This leads to decreased and scattered low temperature joint strengths.
2. The intensified breakaway oxidation underneath the glass near TPB is due to more access to oxygen which leads to continuous oxidation and dissolution of ferritic stainless steel (FSS) into the glass. In this condition, Cr consumption at the FSS surface becomes faster than Cr diffusion from the bulk and Cr is depleted in the underlying alloy. Thus protective chromia layer can no longer be retained and consequently external Fe-rich oxide starts to form.
3. The Ni-coating forms a semi-stable Ni-oxide layer at the metal/glass interface near TPB which can decelerate the outward Cr-diffusion and thus prevents the extension of Cr-depleted region.
4. In Ni-plated samples, inward diffusion of Ni as an austenite stabilizer element leads to extension of unstable austenite zones near the FSS surfaces. Therefore, in addition to high thermal contraction of Ni-oxide near TPB, the austenite to ferrite transformation increases the residual stress at the interface and leads to decreased adhesion strength and scatter in joint strengths. Accordingly, the pure nickel cannot be suitable candidate for protective coating on FSS against the sealing glass for long-term operation of SOFC because its detrimental effects are more significant than positive effect on corroded region extension near the TPB.

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