



University of Belgrade
Technical Faculty in Bor



Chamber of Commerce
and Industry of Serbia

XV International Mineral Processing & Recycling Conference



INTERNATIONAL MINERAL PROCESSING & RECYCLING CONFERENCE

Proceedings

Editors:
Jovica Sokolović
Milan Trumić

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLENARY LECTURES	1
L. Guo, Y. Zhao, Q. Ma, G. Tang, C. Jia, C. Li RESEARCH PROGRESS, TRENDS, AND INNOVATIONS OF DEVELOPMENT ON MINING BACKFILL TECHNOLOGY OF UNDERGROUND METALLIFEROUS MINE	3
V.A. Chanturia, V.V. Morozov, G.P. Dvoichenkova, E.L. Chanturia, Yu. A. Podkamenny INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR THE RECOVERY OF ABNORMALLY LUMINESCENT DIAMONDS BASED ON THE USE OF LUMINOPHORE-CONTAINING MODIFIERS	23
G. Vujić N. Maoduš, M. Živančev WTE AS INTEGRATED PART OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY	32
J.C. Gabriel, H. Bo, N. Charpentier, S. Chevrier, Y. Deng, F.Olivier, D. Xia CRITICAL METALS RECOVERY FROM E-WASTE: FROM MICROFLUIDICS HYDROMETALLURGY TO ECONOMICALLY VIABLE PROCESSES	39
SESSION LECTURES	41
F. Nakhaei, I. Jovanović 3D IMAGING AND APPLICATIONS IN MINERAL PROCESSING	43
D. Singh, S. Basu, B. Mishra. R. Bhima Rao NOVEL APPROACHES TO RECOVER TOTAL HEAVY MINERALS FROM DIFFERENT GRADE BEACH SAND DEPOSITS USING GRAVITY CONCENTRATORS	54
M. Trumić, K. Balanović ROLE OF PARTICLE SHAPE IN THE FLOATABILITY OF TONER PARTICLE	64
I. Smičiklas, M. Egerić, M. Jović COPPER SORPTION CAPACITY OF THE SOIL TREATED WITH UNCONVENTIONAL ALKALIZING AGENTS	73
V. Conić, I. Jovanović COPPER ORE BIOLEACHING FROM ECOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW	79
S. Cvetković, M. Popović, J. Perendija LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT AND USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES	89
WORKSHOP PAPERS	95
P. M. Angelopoulos, G. Anastassakis, N. Kountouris, N. Koukoulis, M. Taxiarchou COMBINED USE OF ORGANOSOLV LIGNIN AND XANTHATES ON SPHALERITE FLOTATION FROM MIXED SULPHIDES	97
P. M. Angelopoulos, N. Kountouris, G. Anastassakis, M. Taxiarchou PARTIAL REPLACEMENT OF XANTHATE BY ORGANOSOLV LIGNIN ON PYRITE/ARSENOPYRITE FLOTATION	103
K. Hružová, July Ann Bazar, Leonidas Matsakas, Anders Sand, Ulrika Rova, Paul Christakopoulos ORGANOSOLV LIGNIN PARTICLES: A NOVEL GREEN REAGENT THAT INCREASES THE FLOTATION EFFICIENCY OF SULFIDE ORES	109
A. Peppas, D. Skenderas, P.M. Angelopoulos, C. Politi ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF LIGNIN BASED ECOFRIENDLY SURFACTANTS FOR FLOTATION PROCESSES TOWARDS CURRENT PRACTICES	115

A. Peppas, K. Hurzova, D. Skenderas, C. Politi, L. Matsakas, P.M. Angelopoulos EVALUATION OF BATTERY MINERALS FLOTATION PROCESS ECO FRIENDLINESS UTILISING BIODEGRADABLE LIGNIN REAGENTS	121
A. Peppas, C. Politi, D. Skenderas, P.M. Angelopoulos ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF RARE EARTHS RECOVERY METHOD FROM BAUXITE RESIDUES	126
PAPERS	133
A. Jankovic, M. Sederkennya MODIFIED BOND AND RITTINGER ENERGY-SIZE RELATIONSHIPS FOR LABORATORY FINE GRINDING	135
V. Nikolić, M. Trumić, D. Tanikić OPTIMIZATION OF MICRONIZING ZEOLITE GRINDING USING ARTIFICIAL NEURAL NETWORKS	143
E. Petrakis, K. Komnitsas THE EFFECT OF MICROWAVE RADIATION ON DRY GRINDING KINETICS OF BAUXITE ORE	150
M.H. Tyeb, S. Mishra, A.K. Majumder LSTM AND CNN COMBINATION BASED MODELLING APPROACH FOR PARTITION CURVE PREDICTION IN HYDROCYCLONES	157
I. Jovanović, M.Ž. Trumić, J. Sokolović, M.S. Trumić, J. Nešković DETERMINATION OF LIMITING SETTLING VELOCITY IN THE SLURRY PIPELINE FROM GRINDING PLANT, USING DIFFERENT APPROACHES – A CASE STUDY	163
N. Omarova, R. Sherembayeva, A.Amirkhan, Zh. Ibraybekov, A. Nesipbay FLOTATION OF POLYMETALLIC LEAD-ZINC ORES OF THE BAKALSKOYE DEPOSIT	168
V.A. Chanturiya, I.Zh. Bunin, M.V. Ryazantseva THE APPLICATION OF THE DIELECTRIC BARRIER DISCHARGE (DBD) FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE SEPARATION OF PYRITE AND ARSENOPYRITE	174
V. Ignatkina, A. Kayumov, N. Yergesheva, P. Chernova BASIC SELECTIVE REAGENT REGIMES FOR COMPLEX SULFIDE ORE FLOTATION	179
S. Chaudhuri, S. Maity, S.C. Maji, D. Roy, U.S. Chattopadhyay STUDIES ON THE FLOATABILITY CHARACTERISTICS OF LOW VOLATILE COKING COAL FINES USING X-RAY DIFFRACTION (XRD) ANALYSIS AS A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL	186
V.I. Ryaboi, V.P. Kretov, E.D. Schepeta, I.V. Ryaboi, S.E. Levkovets APPLICATION OF COLLECTOR BTF-15221 IN FLOTATION OF COPPER- AND GOLD - CONTAINING ORES	193
I. Dervišević, A. Dervišević, M. Tomović, J. Galjak COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REAGENTS FOR GOLD EXTRACTION FROM FLOTATION TAILS	202
E.M.S. Silva, A.C. Silva, J.M.B.S. Cabral, P.S. Oliveira, A.F. Nascimento, A.P. Vieira Filho, S.A. Santos TESTS WITH DIFFERENT FLOCCULANTS FOR CHROMIUM ORE TAILINGS	208
C. Ouyang, B. Lv, K. Jia, Y. Yang STUDY ON THE APPLICATION OF HIGH-EFFICIENCY AND ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY COPPER COLLECTOR TO ASSOCIATED COPPER IN AN IRON ORE	214
S. Sredić, Lj. Tankosić KINETIC STUDIES OF THE ADSORPTION POLYACRILAMIDE-BASED FLOCCULANTS ON NATURAL GOETHITE, QUARTZ AND CLAY MINERALS	221

G. D. Bogdanović, D. Marilović, B. Nikolić, S. J. Petrović COLUMN LEACHING OF LOW-GRADE COPPER SULFIDE ORE WITH SULFURIC ACID	230
K. Gáborová, M. Achimovičová, M. Hegedüs, O. Šestinová AN INFLUENCE OF MECHANICAL ACTIVATION ON THE COPPER LEACHING KINETICS OF BERZELIANITE	236
D. Medić, I. Đorđević, M. Nujkić, A. Papludis, V. Nedelkovski, S. Alagić, S. Milić USE OF COPPER POWDER AS A REDUCING AGENT IN THE LEACHING PROCESS OF LiCoO_2	242
J. Dimitrijević, S. Jevtić, A. Marinković, M. Simić, M. Koprivica, J. Petrović REMOVAL OF HEAVY METAL IONS FROM MULTIMETALLIC SOLUTION BY MODIFIED OAT STRAW	248
M.R. Rath, A.S. Patra, S. Kiran Kumar, M. Mukherjee, A. Chatterjee, A. Ranjan, A.K. Bhatnagar, A.K. Mukherjee A PROCESS TO DECREASE THE CLAY COATING OF IRON ORE LUMPS & FINES BY THE APPLICATION OF DISPERSANTS	254
H. Kurama, S. Kurama SURFACTANTS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS ON NANO-POWDER SYNTHESIS	262
A. Goryachev, D. Makarov METHODS FOR PROCESSING NATURAL AND ANTHROPOGENIC COPPER- NICKEL RAW MATERIALS IN THE ARCTIC	275
Y. Yuankun, D. Mirović DAM BREACH ANALYSIS USING HEC-RAS: A CASE STUDY OF COPPER AND GOLD "ČUKARU PEKI" MINE DAMS	283
A. Milovanović Brkić, Y. Yuankun, N. Buđelan MANAGEMENT OF FLOTATION TAILINGS AS MINING WASTE ON THE COPPER AND GOLD MINE "CUKARU PEKI"	289
N. Pavlovic, F. Palkovits, A. Hall GEO-STABLE DISPOSAL OF COAL COMBUSTION BYPRODUCTS	297
N. Pavlovic, F. Palkovits, A. Hall TAIL WAGGING THE DOG-WHY INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS ARE BETTER-TAILINGS AND BACKFILL DISPOSAL	303
V. Alivojvodic, N. Petrovnijevic POSITION OF COPPER WITHIN URBAN MINING - RECOVERING POTENTIAL FROM MINE TAILINGS	309
V.Tsitsishvili, N.Dolaberidze, N.Mirdzveli, M.Nijaradze, Z.Amiridze, B.Khutsishvili BACTERIOSTATIC ACTIVITY OF GEORGIAN HEULANDITE ENRICHED WITH BIOLOGICALLY ACTIVE METALS	315
V.Tsitsishvili, M.Panayotova, N.Dolaberidze, N.Mirdzveli, M.Nijaradze, Z.Amiridze, B.Khutsishvili, N.Jakipbekova, S.Sakibayeva THERMAL STABILITY OF NATURAL HEULANDITE-CHABAZITE MIXTURES	321
V.Tsitsishvili, M.Panayotova, N.Dolaberidze, N.Mirdzveli, M.Nijaradze, Z.Amiridze, B.Khutsishvili, N.Klarjeishvili, N.Jakipbekova COMPOSITION OF GEORGIAN AND KAZAKHSTANI NATURAL HEULANDITES	327
S. Matijašević, S. Grujić, V. Topalović, J. Stojanović, J. Nikolić, V. Savić, S. Zildžović NANOCRYSTALLIZATION OF POTASSIUM NIOBIUM GERMANATE GLASSES	333

A.C. Silva, E.M.S. Silva, P.S. Oliveira, A.F. Nascimento, A.P. Vieira Filho, D.B. Carvalho Neto ESTIMATING THE ACCURACY, PRECISION, AND RECALL OF THE HAND-SORTING OF A BRAZILIAN CHROMIUM ORE	338
V.V. Morozov, Y.P. Morozov, G. Zorigt, D. Lodoy, E. Jargalsaikhan, I.V. Pestriak SCANNING FLATBED OPTICAL ORE QUALITY ANALYZER	344
B. B. Tchouffa, N. J. Ndemou, M. G. Frida Ntsama CHARACTERIZATION, ENRICHMENT TEST AND VALORIZATION OF IRON ORE FROM NABEBA (NORTH – CONGO)	350
K. Jia, S. Đorđević, C. Ouyang, B. Lv LABORATORY BENEFICIATION TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ON TITANIUM MAGNETITE ORE	355
D. S. Radulović, V. Jovanović, B. Ivošević, D. Todorović, S. Milićević, M. Marković INVESTIGATION OF THE POSSIBILITY OF VALORIZATION OF TWO BORATE SAMPLES FROM THE DEPOSIT "POBRĐE" – BALJEVAC	361
S. Hredzák, M. Matik, O. Šestinová, A. Zubrik, D. Kupka, S. Dolinská, I. Znamenáčková, M. Sisol, M. Marcin, L. Pašek STUDY OF ORE SAMPLES FROM THE ZLATÉ HORY DEPOSIT (HRUBÝ JESENÍK Mts., SILESIA, CZECH REPUBLIC)	367
J. Sokolović, I. Ilić, D. Krstić COMPARISON OF THE RESULTS OF SEPARATION OF DIFFERENT COALS IN THE ANTHRACITE MINE "VRSKA CUKA"	373
B.R. Reddy, K. Abhishek, J.M. Korath, M.R Rath A COMPUTATIONAL TOOL FOR PREDICTION OF JIG CONCENTRATOR OPERATING PARAMETER TO GET IMPROVED YIELD OF CONCENTRATE	379
I. Jovanović, V. Conić, D. Milanović, F. Nakhaei, S. Krstić RELATIVE PREDICTION ERROR OF FLOTATION INDICES BY ANFIS MODELS	387
Z. Štirbanović, R. Stanojlović, J. Sokolović, D. Stanujkić, N. Čirić, I. Miljanović, G. Popović APPLICATION OF VIKOR METHOD FOR SELECTION OF COLLECTOR IN PORPHYRY COPPER ORE FLOTATION	391
S. Milutinović, Lj. Obradović, S. Petrović S. Magdalinović, I. Svrkota RANKING OF FLOTATION TAILINGS POND IN EASTERN SERBIA USING THE AHP METHOD	398
I. Jovanović, V. Conić, J. Sokolović, D. Kržanović, D. Radulović SIMPLE FUZZY MODELS FOR PREDICTION OF FLOTATION INDICES	404
S. Mishra, M.H. Tyeb, A.K. Majumder DEVELOPMENT OF A VIBRATION SENSOR-BASED ONLINE MONITORING SYSTEM FOR DETECTING ROPING IN HYDROCYCLONES	410
B. Farkaš, A. Hrastov, E. Orbanic THE IMPROVEMENT OF MINERAL PROCESSING – CASE STUDY	416
T. Mohit, P. Patel, P. Kaushal, J. Sahoo, V. Arumuru, B. Deo, M. Jain, R. Manchanda IMPROVED ON-LINE FAILURE PREDICTION METHOD OF COAL INJECTION SYSTEM USED IN A SPONGE IRON ROTARY KILN	423
M. Mikić, R. Rajković, S. Trujić, D. Kržanović, M. Jovanović IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND OF THE OPEN MINE AND LANDFILLS IN SOUTH MINING DISTRICT – MAJDANPEK	429

M. Jovanović, D. Kržanović, R. Rajković, M. Mikić, M. Maksimović APPLICATION OF GEOGRIDS IN RECULTIVATION MEASURES AGAINST LAND DEGRADATION	435
V. Gardić, R. Marković, Z. Stevanović, A. Isvoran, T. Marković APPLICATION OF SUSTAINABLE CYCLING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN PHYTOREMEDIATION TECHNOLOGY OF CONTAMINATED SOILS	441
D. Đurđević-Milošević, A. Petrović, J. Elez, G. Gagula, V. Kalaba SUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO THE LACTIC ACID PRODUCTION AND ANTIBACTERIAL USE	445
B. Cekova, M. Matlievska, M. M. Puncheva, V. Velkoski, B. Kuzmanovski DIGITALIZATION OF WASTE, WAYS FOR MORE EFFICIENT WASTE MANAGEMENT	451
A. Vasileiadou, S. Zoras, A. Dimoudi INVESTIGATION OF SLAGGING CHARACTERISTICS OF INDUSTRIAL SOLID WASTES	458
A. Vasileiadou, S. Zoras, A. Dimoudi MODELLING OF CO _x AND NO _x EMISSIONS FROM INDUSTRIAL SOLID WASTES COMBUSTION USING ANSYS CHEMKIN PRO	464
Z. Bayer Ozturk, S. Kurama, A. Eser THE USAGE AND EFFECT OF BASALT CUTTING WASTE (BCW) IN CERAMIC GLAZE COMPOSITIONS CONTAINING OPAQUE AND MATT FRIT	470
D. Dinić, S. Stupar, N. Jovanović, M. Tanić, S. Jevtić SYNTHESIS AND CHARACTERIZATION OF POROUS CERAMICS BASED ON COPPER SLAG	480
M. Šišić, Dž. Dautbegović, M. Duraković ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SLAG FROM METALLURGICAL PLANTS IN ZENICA DISPOSED OF INDUSTRIAL WASTE LANDFILL "RACA"	486
Dz. Datubegovic, M. Hasanbasic, M. Sisic, V. Birdahic ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE INTRODUCTION OF LARGER CONTAINERS INTO THE WASTE COLLECTION SYSTEM IN THE CITY OF ZENICA	492
N. Bušatlić, I. Bušatlić, A. Halilović, N. Merdić, L. Kovač ENVIRONMENTALLY ACCEPTABLE CEMENTS WITH THE ADDITION OF GRANULATED BLAST FURNACE SLAG	498
A. Stojićević, M. Antić, M. Purić VEGETABLE INDUSTRY BY-PRODUCTS AS RAW MATERIALS IN FUNCTIONAL FOOD PRODUCTION	507
A. Petrović, R. Marković, D. Božić CARBON NANOTUBES AS POTENTIAL MATERIAL FOR WASTEWATER TREATMENT - A REVIEW	514
M. Marić, A. Ivković, B. Ivković, A. Janošević Ležaić, S. Uskoković-Marković, J. Savić, M. Milojević-Rakić, D. Bajuk-Bogdanović REMOVAL OF METHYLENE BLUE FROM AQUEOUS SOLUTIONS USING AN IRON-RICH SOIL	519
R. Marković, V. Gardić, R. Kovačević, Zoran Stevanović, A. Isvoran, V. Marjanović, A. Petrović BOR DISCRIT RIVERS WATERCOURSES CONTAMINATION BY Cu AND Ni IONS	524
P. Kekarjawlekar, N. Kamal, K. Maniyar, B. Deo, P. Nanda, P. Malakar, R. Manchanda DEVELOPING SAFE OPERATING PRACTICES (SOP) FOR POSTCOMBUSTION CHAMBER IN A SPONGE IRON PLANT	530

D. Milošević, M. Radosavljević, S. Polavder, Ž. Praštalo ARRANGEMENT OF FIELDS DEVASTATED BY CONSTRUCTION OF MAIN GAS PIPELINE	536
D. Đurđević-Milošević, A. Petrović, J. Elez, V. Kalaba, G. Gagula ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION THROUGH THE RATIONAL USE OF SODIUM HYPOCHLORITE AS A FUNGICIDE	542
G. Kyparissis, A. Goukoudis, G. Papadimas, E. Tasiopoulos, A. Vasileiadou CASE STUDY OF ENERGY SAVING IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL THROUGH THE INSTALLATION OF A PHOTOVOLTAIC SYSTEM ON THE ROOF	548
D. Topalović, J. Marković, M. Jović, S. Dragović, I. Smičiklas THE ARSENIC SORPTION CAPACITY OF DIFFERENT SERBIAN SOILS	554
F. Popescu, M. Zot, E.A. Laza USING SHERPA TOOL FOR ASSESSMENT OF EUROPEAN WATERBORNE TRANSPORT SECTOR IMPACT ON AIR QUALITY	560
A. Stojić, D. Tanikić, E. Požega THE IMPACT OF EXPLOITATION OF PRIMARY AND ALTERNATIVE ENERGY SOURCES ON THE ENVIRONMENT	566
A. Radojević, S. Šerbula, T. Kalinović, J. Milosavljević, J. Kalinović MOBILE PHONES – A VALUABLE COMPONENT OF E-WASTE STREAM	572
K. Janković, M. Stojanović, D. Bojović, A. Terzić, S. Stanković APPLICATION OF COAL COMBUSTION BYPRODUCTS IN SELF-COMPACTING CONCRETE: INFLUENCE ON FLOWABILITY	579
D. Radosavljević, A. Jelić, M. Stamenović IMPACT OF STUDENT MIGRATIONS ON SUSTAINABLE AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA	585
D. Radosavljević, A. Jelić, M. Stamenović DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF RECYCLABLE WASTE IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA	592
Deependra Singh SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY OF INDIAN PLACER MINERALS-THEIR DISTRIBUTION AND MINERAL ASSEMBLAGES	598
ABSTRACTS	607
M. Tasić, I. Stojković, V. Pavićević, V. Veljković SIMULATION OF HYDRODYNAMIC CAVITATION-ASSISTED BIODIESEL PRODUCTION FROM WASTE COOKING OIL USING ASPEN PLUS	609
A. Jocić, S. Marić, A. Dimitrijević RECOVERY OF METALS FROM INDUSTRIAL EFFLUENTS USING AN IONIC LIQUID-BASED STRATEGY	610
S. Marić, A. Jocić, A. Dimitrijević IONIC LIQUID-BASED TECHNOLOGY FOR METAL RECOVERY FROM ELECTRONIC WASTE	611
J. Vučićević, S. Čupić, M. Jauković, V. Đurđević, M. Stamenović, A. Božić, A. Janićijević CURRENT STATE OF THE QUALITY OF THE LUG RIVER IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF MLADENOVAC	612

D. Žnidarič THE ENERGY CRISIS AND THE EXPLOITATION OF MINERAL RESOURCES IN THE LIGHT OF INCREASING LOADS IN SPACE	613
S. Zeković A NEW GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND REGULATION FOR SUSTAINABLE SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT OF MINING	614
P.M. Angelopoulos, P. Oustadakis, G. Anastassakis, M. Georgiou, N. Kountouris HYDROTHERMAL TREATMENT OF BAUXITE RESIDUE FOR IRON RECOVERY ENHANCEMENT BY MAGNETIC SEPARATION	615
O. Ayoglu, M. Sinche-Gonzalez, M. Moilanen TEXTURAL MINERALOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF MAGNETITE LIBERATION CONTAINING COPPER INCLUSIONS	616
M. Sinche-Gonzalez MASTER IN MINERAL PROCESING (EMJM-PROMISE) IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMAND OF CRITICAL MATERIALS AND ENERGY TRANSITION	617
ADVERTISING MATERIALS	619
Department for Mineral and Recycling Technologies	621
Serbia Zijin Mining	624
Serbia Zijin Copper	627
Analysis d.o.o.	629
tozero	631
Monicom	632
EMJM-PROMISE	633

USE OF COPPER POWDER AS A REDUCING AGENT IN THE LEACHING PROCESS OF LiCoO_2

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ABSTRACT – In this study, the possibility of using copper powder as a reducing agent in the process of cathode material leaching from spent lithium-ion batteries (LIBs) was examined. The copper powder was obtained by grinding copper foil, which is used in LIBs as a current collector. Optimal leaching efficiency of 99.84% for lithium and 99.99% for cobalt was achieved by using 0.4 mol/L phosphoric acid with 0.2 g of copper powder, during the leaching time of 30 min, and at 80°C. Leaching results indicated that copper powder could be used as an effective reducing agent to recover lithium and cobalt.

Keywords: LIBs, Current Collector, Phosphoric Acid, Cobalt, Lithium.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the existing energy crisis and increasing environmental pollution, developing clean and sustainable energy is the biggest challenge today. Lithium-ion batteries (LIBs) have found application in many branches of industry as "green technology" [1]. However, with the popularization and development of electric cars and portable electronic devices, the amount of spent LIBs is rapidly increasing. In addition to the fact that spent LIBs represent a significant secondary source of many valuable metals, their improper disposal can seriously worsen the quality of the environment [2].

Lithium cobalt oxide (LiCoO_2) was the first commercialized cathode material, but it still represents the basis for the development of LIBs. For high efficiency of LIBs recycling, complete dissolution of the cathode material is necessary. In the leaching studies published so far, sulfuric acid with hydrogen peroxide as a reducing agent was most often used to dissolve the cathode material [3-5]. The advantage of using hydrogen peroxide in the reductive leaching process is that only oxygen and water are obtained by its decomposition, and thus no additional impurities are introduced into the leaching system. However, hydrogen peroxide decomposes at high temperatures in the presence of sulfuric acid, which reduces the efficiency of cathode material leaching. Considering that the standard electrode potential of LiCoO_2 reduction is 2.13 V, it can be concluded that iron, copper, and aluminum, which are integral parts of LIBs, can be used as reducing agents in the leaching process [6]. Ghassa *et al.* [7] investigated the possibility of using iron scrap, obtained from the metal casing of LIBs, in the leaching process of

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$\text{LiCo}_{1/3}\text{Ni}_{1/3}\text{Mn}_{1/3}\text{O}_2$ in sulfuric acid. The results of their study indicated that the extraction rate of cobalt increased significantly by adding 6 g/L of iron scrap to the leaching system. Also, it was noted that the presence of iron scrap has no significant effect on the degree of lithium extraction, which is explained by the fact that the lithium extraction process does not require a reducing atmosphere. Porvali *et al.* [8] investigated the combined effect of Fe^{2+} ions and copper scrap on the kinetics of LiCoO_2 leaching in sulfuric acid and came to the conclusion that Fe^{2+} ions act as a reducing agent, whereby Fe^{3+} ions are formed, which are converted back to Fe^{2+} ions by oxidation of copper to Cu^{2+} .

In the aforementioned studies, the reduction properties of copper and iron were examined in the process of dissolving the cathode material in a sulfate medium. The aim of this work is to examine the possibility of using copper powder as a reducing agent during the leaching of LiCoO_2 in phosphoric acid.

EXPERIMENTAL

Preparation of cathode material and copper powder

To test the possibility of using copper powder as a reducing agent, 17 spent LIBs were collected. The spent LIBs were first disassembled into individual LIBs cells and then discharged using a 5.5 Ω resistance wire. The cathode material was obtained by separating LiCoO_2 from aluminum foil in a two-stage thermal treatment at 580°C and 630°C. In order to obtain the copper powder, the anode material was mechanically removed from the copper foil. The obtained copper foil was crushed in a laboratory mill.

Leaching tests

Cathode material leaching experiments were performed in a 600 ml glass laboratory beaker with a double bottom. The leaching apparatus was equipped with a condenser to prevent evaporation of the leach solution and a thermometer to control the temperature. 200 ml of leaching solution of a certain concentration is first thermostated to the desired temperature.

When the desired temperature was reached, 2.0 g of cathode material (with and without the addition of 0.2 g of copper powder) was added to the reactor and the mixer was turned on with a controlled number of revolutions. Leach solutions (1.0 ml of solution) were sampled at precisely determined time intervals (5, 15, 30, 45, and 60 min), filtered, and diluted to 50 ml in volumetric flasks.

An optical emission spectrometer with inductively coupled plasma (ICP-OES) Optima 8300, Perkin Elmer, USA was used to determine the content of Li and Co in the initial cathode material, as well as to monitor the content of the mentioned metals in leach solutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The contents of cobalt and lithium in the initial cathode material determined by ICP-OES were 47.91% and 6.97%, respectively.

Leaching of the cathode material in H₃PO₄

The influence of copper powder on the degree of extraction of Co and Li

In order to examine the influence of copper powder on the degree of extraction of Li and Co, leaching experiments were performed in a solution of 0.4 mol/dm³ H₃PO₄ with and without the addition of 0.2 g of copper powder, at a temperature of 80°C, at a stirring speed of 600 rpm and process duration of 30 min. The obtained results are shown in Figures 1a and 1b.

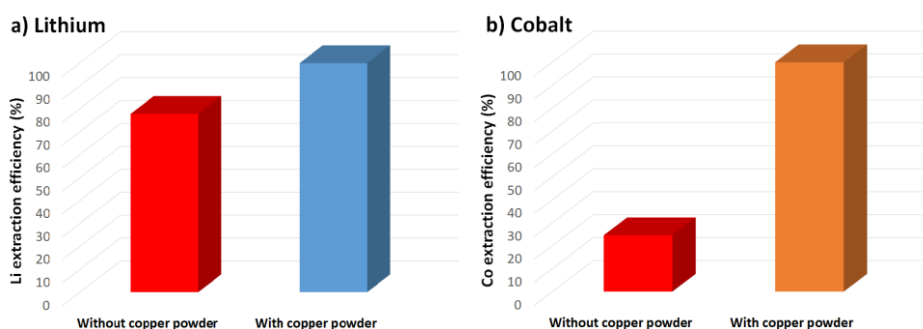
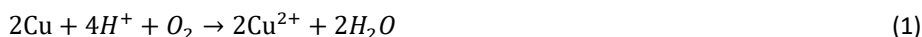


Figure 1 Effect of copper powder on Li and Co extraction

From Figures 1a and 1b, it can be seen that in the absence of copper powder, the degrees of Li and Co leaching were 77.73% and 24.58%, respectively. However, when the copper powder was added to H₃PO₄, the degree of Li leaching increased from 77.73% to 99.84%, while the degree of Co leaching increased from 24.58% to 99.99%. In this study, H₃PO₄ probably acted as a chelating agent, whereby Li and Co were extracted from the cathode material through a complexation process. The low level of Co extraction in the absence of copper powder is probably due to the fact that Co in LiCoO₂ is in the form of Co³⁺, which is poorly soluble in an acidic medium, and for its dissolution, the presence of a reducing agent [9], i.e. copper powder, is necessary. Namely, in an acidic environment, Cu can be oxidized with oxygen from the air according to the following reaction [8]:



Taking into account the values for the electrode potentials of Cu of 0.34 V and LiCoO₂ of 2.13 V, it can be assumed that the dissolution of Cu in an acidic environment can also be a result of galvanic corrosion, where electrical contact between Cu and LiCoO₂ is necessary [6,8]. Since it is a complex system, for a more detailed analysis of the role of Cu powder in the process of extracting Li and Co from the cathode material, it is necessary to conduct additional experiments, which will be the subject of research in our next paper.

The influence of temperature on the degree of extraction of Li and Co

The influence of temperature on the degree of extraction of Li and Co was investigated in the range from 35°C to 80°C in a solution of 0.4 mol/dm³ H₃PO₄ with the

addition of 0.2 g of copper powder, at a mixing speed of 600 rpm and duration of the process of 30 min. The test results are shown in Figure 2.

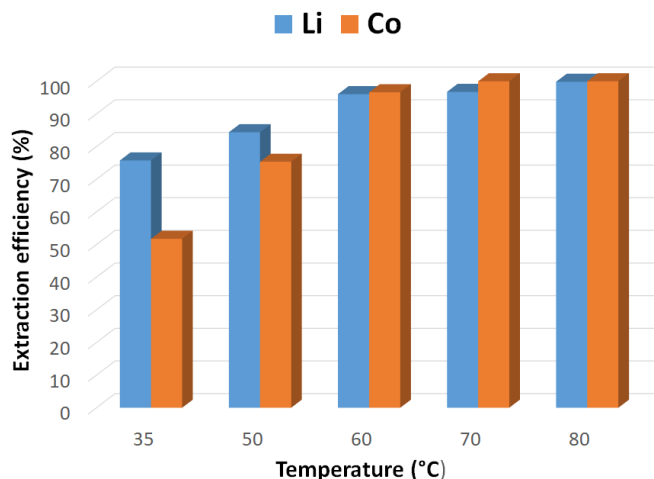


Figure 2 Effect of temperature on Li and Co extraction

From Figure 2 it can be seen that an increase in temperature leads to an increase in the degree of extraction of both tested metals. The maximum extraction values of Li and Co of 99.84% and 99.99%, respectively were achieved at a temperature of 80 °C. Similar results were obtained by Pinna *et al.* [10] when examining the effect of temperature on the degree of dissolution of LiCoO_2 in H_3PO_4 in the presence of H_2O_2 as a reducing agent.

The influence of time on the degree of extraction of Li and Co

The influence of time on the degree of extraction of Li and Co was investigated at a temperature of 80°C in a solution of $0.4 \text{ mol/dm}^3 \text{ H}_3\text{PO}_4$ with the addition of 0.2 g of copper powder, at a mixing speed of 600 rpm (Figure 3).

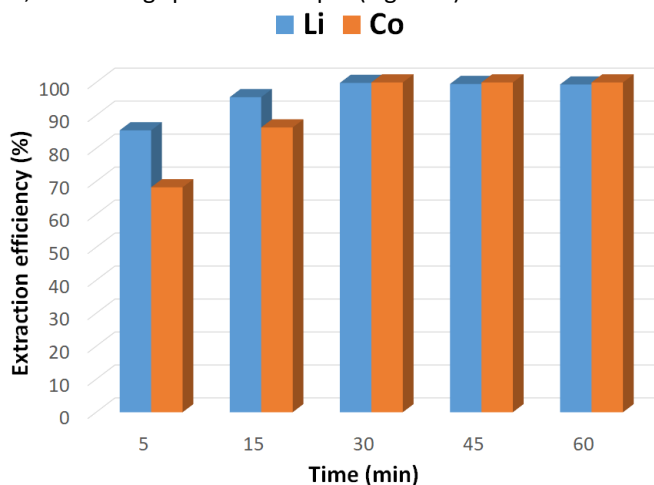


Figure 3 Effect of time on Li and Co extraction

The obtained results indicated that the degree of extraction of Li and Co increased with the increase in the duration of the leaching process, especially in the first 30 min. After 30 min, the degree of extraction of Li and Co reached a value of about 100%. For this reason, a time of 30 min can be considered the optimal time for the leaching process of the cathode material. The increase in the degree of metal extraction with an increase in the duration of the process can be related to the well-known fact that increasing the contact time between the solid and liquid phases increases the degree of dissolution of the solid phase [10].

CONCLUSION

Based on the conducted experiments, it can be concluded that copper powder is an effective reducing agent in the process of cathode material leaching in phosphoric acid. In the presence of copper powder, the degree of Li extraction increased from 77.73% to 99.84%, while the degree of Co extraction increased from 24.58% to 99.99%. The greater influence of copper powder on the Co extraction process was probably due to the fact that the Li extraction process does not require a reducing atmosphere. The obtained results were achieved at an optimal temperature of 80°C and a duration of the process of 30 min.

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