

Method for the energy-efficient production of sodium and potassium alcoholates

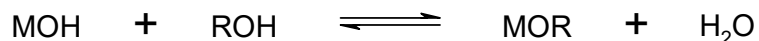
The present invention relates to a process for producing alkali metal alkoxides in countercurrent by reactive rectification, wherein the alkali metal is selected from sodium and potassium. In a first step the alcohol is reacted in countercurrent with the relevant alkali metal hydroxide. In a second step the obtained mixture of alcohol and water is separated in a rectification column and the generated alcoholic vapours are compressed to increase their temperature. In contrast to conventional processes the energy removed upon cooling of the compressed vapours is utilized by employing it in the first step of the process according to the invention. This allows energy-efficient production of the relevant alkali metal alkoxides.

1. Background of the invention

The production of alkali metal alkoxides is an important industrial process.

Alkali metal alkoxides are used as strong bases in the synthesis of numerous chemicals, for example in the production of pharmaceutical or agrochemical active ingredients. Alkali metal alkoxides are also used as catalysts in transesterification and amidation reactions.

Alkali metal alkoxides (MOR) are produced by reactive distillation of alkali metal hydroxides (MOH) and alcohols (ROH) in a countercurrent distillation column, wherein the reaction water formed according to the following reaction <1> is removed with the distillate.



Such a process principle is described, for example, in US 2,877,274 A, wherein aqueous alkali metal hydroxide solution and gaseous methanol are passed into a rectification column in countercurrent. This process is described again in principally unchanged form in WO 01/42178 A1.

Similar processes, which, however, additionally employ an entraining agent such as benzene, are described in GB 377,631 A and US 1,910,331 A. This entraining agent is used to separate water and the water-soluble alcohol. In both patents the condensate is subjected to a phase separation to separate off the reaction water.

Accordingly, DE 96 89 03 C describes a process for continuous production of alkali metal alkoxides in a reaction column, wherein the water-alcohol mixture withdrawn at the top of the column is condensed and then subjected to a phase separation. The aqueous phase is discarded and the alcoholic phase is returned to the top of the column together with the fresh alcohol. EP 0 299 577 A2 describes a similar process, wherein the water in the condensate is separated off with the aid of a membrane.

The industrially important alkali metal alkoxides are those of sodium and potassium, especially the methoxides and ethoxides. Their synthesis is frequently described in the prior art, for example in EP 1 997 794 A1.

- 5 The syntheses of alkali metal alkoxides by reactive rectification described in the prior art typically afford vapours comprising the employed alcohol and water. It is advantageous to for economic reasons to reuse the alcohol comprised in the vapours as a reactant in the reactive distillation. The vapours are therefore typically supplied to a rectification column and the alcohol present therein separated (described for example in GB 737 453 A and US 4,566,947 A). The thus recovered
10 alcohol is then supplied to the reactive distillation as a reactant for example. Alternatively or in addition a portion of the alcohol vapour may be utilized for heating the rectification column (described in WO 2010/097318 A1). However, this requires that the vapour be compressed to achieve the temperature level required for heating the rectification column. Especially a multistage compression of the vapour is thermodynamically advantageous. The vapour is cooled between the
15 compression stages here. The intermediate cooling also ensures that the maximum allowable temperature of the compressor is not exceeded.

The disadvantage of this cooling performed in the customary processes is that the energy thus withdrawn dissipates without being utilized.

- 20 There is therefore a need for improved processes for producing alkoxides of sodium and potassium by reactive distillation. These shall avoid the abovementioned disadvantages and especially allow energy-efficient utilization of the heat generated during compression and cooling of the vapours.

2. Brief summary of the invention

- 25 The present invention accordingly provides a process for producing at least one alkali metal alkoxide of formula M_AOR , wherein R is a C_1 to C_6 hydrocarbon radical, preferably methyl, and wherein M_A is a metal selected from sodium, potassium, preferably sodium, wherein:

- 30 (a1) a reactant stream S_{AE1} comprising ROH is reacted with a reactant stream S_{AE2} comprising M_AOH in countercurrent in a reactive rectification column RR_A to afford a crude product RP_A comprising M_AOR , water, ROH, M_AOH ,

- wherein a bottoms product stream S_{AP} comprising ROH and M_AOR is withdrawn at the lower end of
35 RR_A and a vapour stream S_{AB} comprising water and ROH is withdrawn at the upper end of RR_A ,

- (a2) and optionally, simultaneously with and spatially separate from step (a1), a reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH is reacted with a reactant stream S_{BE2} comprising M_BOH in countercurrent in a reactive rectification column RR_B to afford a crude product RP_B comprising M_BOOR , water, ROH,
40 M_BOH , wherein M_B is a metal selected from sodium, potassium, preferably potassium,

wherein a bottoms product stream **S_{BP}** comprising ROH and M_BOR is withdrawn at the lower end of **RR_B** and a vapour stream **S_{BB}** comprising water and ROH is withdrawn at the upper end of **RR_B**,

- 5 (b) the vapour stream **S_{AB}** and, when step (a2) is performed, the vapour stream **S_{BB}**, in admixture with **S_{AB}** or separately from **S_{AB}**, preferably in admixture with **S_{AB}**, is passed into a rectification column **RD_A** and in **RD_A** is separated into an ROH-comprising vapour stream **S_{B2}** having a pressure **p_{B2}** and a temperature **T_{B2}** at the top of **RD_A** and a water stream **S_W** at the bottom of **RD_A**,
 - 10 (c) at least a portion of the vapour stream **S_{B2}** is compressed to obtain a vapour stream **S_{B3}** compressed with respect to **S_{B2}** having a pressure **p_{B3} > p_{B2}** and a temperature **T_{B3} > T_{B2}**,
 - (d) energy from **S_{B3}** is transferred to at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}** and, when step (a2) is performed, alternatively or additionally, preferably additionally, transferred to at least one of **RP_B**,
 - 15 **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}**,
- to obtain a vapour stream **S_{B4}** having a lower energy content than **S_{B3}**.
- 20 In a preferred embodiment of the process according to the invention the vapour stream **S_{B4}** is used for heating the rectification column **RD_A** and/or, preferably and, recycled into said column in a step (e).

25 3. Figures

- Figure 1 shows an embodiment of the process according to the invention in which in a reaction column **RR_A** <100> NaOH **S_{AE2}** <102> is reacted with methanol **S_{AE1}** <103> to afford sodium methoxide <104>. A methanol-methoxide mixture **S_{AP}** <104> is withdrawn at the bottom of the
- 30 reaction column. The obtained vapour **S_{AB}** <107> is supplied to a water/methanol column **RD_A** <300> in which methanol is distillatively recovered as vapour **S_{B2}** <302>. The vapour **S_{B2}** <302> is precompressed using compressor **VD_{AB2}** <303> and in compressor **VD₁** <401> compressed to afford vapour **S_{B3}** <403>. The energy removed after the compression of the vapour **S_{B3}** <403> in the intermediate cooler **WT_x** <402> is supplied to the evaporator **V_{SA}** <105> at the bottom of the
 - 35 reaction column **RR_A** <100>. After removal of the energy the obtained vapour **S_{B4}** <404> is optionally recompressed using compressor **VD_x** <405> and the thus obtained vapour **S_{B5}** <409> supplied to the evaporator **V_{SRD}** <406> at the bottom of the rectification column **RD_A** <300> for heating.

Figure 2 shows an embodiment of the process according to the invention in which in each case in two separate reaction columns **RR_A** <100A>, **RR_B** <100B> NaOH **S_{AE2}** <102A> and KOH **S_{BE2}** <102B> are reacted with methanol **S_{AE2}** <103A>/**S_{BE2}** <103B> to afford the respective methoxide. The methanol-methoxide mixture **S_{AP}** <104A> and **S_{BP}** <104B> is in each case withdrawn at the bottom of the reaction columns. The obtained vapours are supplied as mixture <107C> to a water/methanol column **RD_A** <300> in which methanol is distillatively recovered as vapour **S_{B2}** <302>. Said vapour **S_{B2}** <302> is precompressed using compressor **VD_{AB2}** <303> and using compressor **VD₁** <401> compressed to afford compressed vapour **S_{B3}** <403>. The energy removed from the compressed vapour **S_{B3}** <403> in the intermediate cooler **WT_x** <402> is supplied to the evaporator **V_{SA}** <105A> at the bottom of the reaction column **RR_A** <100A> and the evaporator **V_{SB}** <105B> at the bottom of the reaction column **RR_B** <100B>. After the intermediate cooler **WT_x** <402> the obtained vapour **S_{B4}** <404> optionally passes through a further compressor **VD_x** <405> and is supplied as vapour **S_{B5}** <409> for heating the evaporator **V_{SRD}** <406> at the bottom of the rectification column **RD_A** <300>.

4. Detailed description of the invention

4.1 Step (a1) of the process according to the invention

In step (a1) of the process according to the invention a reactant stream **S_{AE1}** comprising ROH is reacted with a reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprising M_AOH in countercurrent in a reactive distillation column **RR_A** to afford a crude product **RP_A** comprising M_AOR, water, ROH, M_AOH,

According to the invention a “reactive rectification column” is to be understood as meaning a rectification column in which, at least in some parts, the reactions according to step (a1) or step (a2) of the process according to the invention are carried out. It may also be abbreviated to “reaction column”.

In step (a1) of the process according to the invention a bottoms product stream **S_{AP}** comprising ROH and M_AOR is withdrawn at the lower end of **RR_A**. A vapour stream **S_{AB}** comprising water and ROH is withdrawn at the upper end of **RR_A**.

In the process according to the invention R is a C₁ to C₆ hydrocarbon radical, preferably selected from the group consisting of methyl, ethyl, *n*-propyl, *iso*-propyl, *n*-butyl, *sec*-butyl, *iso*-butyl, *tert*-butyl, isomers of pentyl such as for example *n*-pentyl, more preferably selected from the group consisting of methyl, ethyl, *n*-propyl, *iso*-propyl, yet more preferably selected from the group consisting of methyl and ethyl. R is particularly preferably methyl and ROH is accordingly methanol.

M_A is selected from sodium, potassium, preferably sodium.

The reactant stream **S_{AE1}** comprises ROH. In a preferred embodiment the mass fraction of ROH in **S_{AE1}** is $\geq 95\%$ by weight, yet more preferably $\geq 99\%$ by weight, wherein **S_{AE1}** otherwise comprises especially water.

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The alcohol ROH employed in step (a1) of the process according to the invention as reactant stream **S_{AE1}** may also be commercially available alcohol having an alcohol mass fraction of more than 99.8% by weight and a mass fraction of water of up to 0.2% by weight.

10 The reactant stream **S_{AE1}** is preferably added in vaporous form.

The reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprises M_AOH. In a preferred embodiment **S_{AE2}** comprises not only M_AOH but also at least one further compound selected from water, ROH. It is yet more preferable when **S_{AE2}** comprises water in addition to M_AOH, thus rendering **S_{AE2}** an aqueous solution of M_AOH.

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When the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprises M_AOH and water the mass fraction of M_AOH based on the total weight of the aqueous solution forming **S_{AE2}** is especially in the range from 10% to 55% by weight, preferably from 15% to 54% by weight, more preferably from 30% to 53% by weight and particularly preferably from 45% to 52% by weight. It is most preferable when the proportion of

20 M_AOH in the aqueous solution is 50% by weight.

When the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprises M_AOH and ROH the mass fraction of M_AOH in ROH based on the total weight of the solution forming **S_{AE2}** is especially in the range from 10% to 55% by weight, preferably from 15% to 54% by weight, more preferably from 30% to 53% by weight and particularly preferably from 45% to 52% by weight.

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In the particular case in which the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprises both water and ROH in addition to M_AOH it is particularly preferable when the mass fraction of M_AOH in ROH and water based on the total weight of the solution forming **S_{AE2}** is especially in the range from 10% to 55% by weight, preferably from 15% to 54% by weight, more preferably from 30% to 53% by weight and particularly preferably from 45% to 52% by weight.

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Step (a1) of the process according to the invention is performed in a reactive rectification column (or "reaction column") **RR_A**.

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Step (a2) of the process according to the invention is performed in a reactive rectification column (or "reaction column") **RR_B**.

The reaction column **RR_A/RR_B** preferably contains internals. Suitable internals are, for example, trays, structured packings or unstructured packings. When the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B** contains

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trays, suitable trays include bubble cap trays, valve trays, tunnel cap trays, Thormann trays, cross-slit bubble cap trays or sieve trays. When the reaction column RR_A/RR_B contains trays it is preferable to select trays where at most 5% by weight, preferably less than 1% by weight, of the liquid trickles through the respective trays. The constructional measures required to minimize trickle-through of the liquid are familiar to those skilled in the art. In the case of valve trays, particularly tightly closing valve designs are selected for example. Reducing the number of valves also makes it possible to increase the vapour velocity in the tray openings to double the value typically established. When using sieve trays it is particularly advantageous to reduce the diameter of the tray openings while maintaining or even increasing the number of openings.

When using structured or unstructured packings, structured packings are preferred in terms of uniform distribution of the liquid. In this embodiment it is further provided that in all parts of the column cross section corresponding to more than 2% of the total column cross section the average ratio of liquid stream to vapour stream must not be exceeded by more than 15%, preferably by more than 3%, in respect of the liquid. This minimized liquid amount makes it possible for the capillary effect at the wire meshes to eliminate local peaks of liquid sprinkling density.

For columns comprising unstructured packings, especially comprising random packings, and for columns comprising structured packings the desired characteristics of the liquid distribution may be achieved when the liquid sprinkling density in the edge region of the column cross section adjacent to the column shell, corresponding to about 2% to 5% of the total column cross section, is reduced compared to the other cross sectional regions by up to 100%, preferably by 5% to 15%. This is easily achievable for example through specific distribution of the drip points of the liquid distributors or their bores.

The process according to the invention may be carried out either continuously or discontinuously. It is preferably carried out continuously.

According to the invention "reaction of a reactant stream S_{AE1} comprising ROH with a reactant stream S_{AE2} comprising M_AOH in countercurrent" is especially achieved as a result of the feed point for at least a portion of the reactant stream S_{AE1} comprising ROH in step (a1) being arranged on the reaction column RR_A below the feed point for the reactant stream S_{AE2} comprising M_AOH .

The reaction column RR_A preferably comprises at least 2, in particular 15 to 40, theoretical trays between the feed point of the reactant stream S_{AE1} and the feed point of the reactant stream S_{AE2} .

The reaction column RR_A is preferably operated as a pure stripping column. Accordingly the reactant stream S_{AE1} comprising ROH is especially supplied in vaporious form in the lower region of the reaction column RR_A . Step (a1) of the process according to the invention also comprises the case where a portion of the reactant stream S_{AE1} comprising ROH is added in vaporious form below

the feed point of the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprising aqueous sodium hydroxide solution **M_AOH** but nevertheless at the upper end or in the region of the upper end of the reaction column **RR_A**. This makes it possible to reduce the dimensions of the lower region of the reaction column **RR_A**. When a portion of the reactant stream **S_{AE1}** comprising ROH, in particular methanol, is added especially in vaporous form at the upper end or in the region of the upper end of the reaction column **RR_A** only a fraction of 10% to 70% by weight, preferably of 30% to 50% by weight, (in each case based on the total amount of the alcohol ROH employed in step (a1)) is introduced at the lower end of the reaction column **RR_A** and the remaining fraction is added in vaporous form in a single stream or divided into a plurality of substreams preferably 1 to 10 theoretical trays, particularly preferably 1 to 3 theoretical trays, below the feed point of the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprising **M_AOH**.

In the reaction column **RR_A** the reactant stream **S_{AE1}** comprising ROH is then reacted with the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** comprising **M_AOH** according to the reaction <1>described hereinabove to afford **M_AOR** and **H₂O**, wherein these products are present in admixture with the reactants ROH und **M_AOH** since an equilibrium reaction is concerned. Accordingly a crude product **RP_A** which contains not only the products **M_AOR** and water but also ROH and **M_AOH** is obtained in the reaction column **RR_A** in step (a1) of the process according to the invention.

The bottoms product stream **S_{AP}** comprising ROH and **M_AOR** is obtained and then withdrawn at the lower end of **RR_A**.

A water-containing alcohol stream, described hereinabove as "vapour stream **S_{AB}** comprising water and ROH", is withdrawn at the upper end of **RR_A**, preferably at the column top of **RR_A**.

This vapour stream **S_{AB}** comprising water and ROH is supplied to step (b) of the process according to the invention. As part of at least one of the streams **S_{B2}**, **S_{B3}**, **S_{B4}** a portion of the alcohol obtained in the distillation in step (b) may be supplied to the reaction column **RR_A** as reactant stream **S_{AE1}**.

The amount of the alcohol ROH comprised by the reactant stream **S_{AE1}** is preferably chosen such that said alcohol also serves as a solvent for the alkali metal alkoxide **M_AOR** obtained in the bottoms product stream **S_{AP}**. The amount of the alcohol ROH in the reactant stream **S_{AE1}** is preferably chosen to achieve in the bottom of reaction column the desired concentration of the alkali metal alkoxide solution which is withdrawn as a bottoms product stream **S_{AP}** comprising ROH and **M_AOR**.

In a preferred embodiment of the process according to the invention, and especially in the cases where **S_{AE2}** contains water in addition to **M_AOH**, the ratio of the total weight (masses; units: kg) of alcohol employed in step (a1) as reactant stream **S_{AE1}** ROH to the total weight (masses; unit: kg) of

MAOH employed in step (a1) as reactant stream S_{AE2} is 4: 1 to 50: 1, more preferably 9: 1 to 48: 1, yet more preferably 13 : 1 to 35: 1, yet still more preferably 22: 1 to 30: 1.

The reaction column RR_A is operated with or without, preferably without, reflux.

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“Without reflux” is to be understood as meaning that the vapour stream S_{AB} withdrawn at the upper end of RR_A comprising water and ROH is completely supplied to the rectification column RD_A according to step (b). The vapour stream S_{AB} comprising water and ROH is preferably supplied to the rectification column RD_A in vaporious form.

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“With reflux” is to be understood as meaning that the vapour stream S_{AB} withdrawn at the upper end of the respective column, reaction column RR_A in step (a1), comprising water and ROH is not completely discharged, i.e. is not completely supplied to the rectification column RD_A in step (b), but rather is at least partially, preferably partially, supplied to the respective column, reaction
 15 column RR_A in step (a1), as reflux. In the cases where such a reflux is established the reflux ratio is preferably 0.05 to 0.99, more preferably 0.1 to 0.9, yet more preferably 0.11 to 0.34, particularly preferably 0.14 to 0.27 and very particularly preferably 0.17 to 0.24. A reflux may be established by attaching to the top of the respective column, reaction column RR_A in step (a1), a condenser K_{RRA} in which the vapour stream S_{AB} is at least partially condensed and sent back to the respective
 20 column, reaction column RR_A in step (a1). Generally and in the context of the present invention a reflux ratio is to be understood as meaning the ratio of the mass flow (kg/h) recycled to the respective column in liquid form (reflux) to the mass flow (kg/h) discharged from the respective column in liquid form (distillate) or gaseous form (vapours).

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In the embodiment in which a reflux is established on the reaction column RR_A the MAOH employed in step (a1) as reactant stream S_{AE2} may also be at least partially mixed with the reflux stream and the resulting mixture thus supplied to step (a1).

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Step (a1) of the process according to the invention is carried out especially at a temperature in the range of 45°C to 150°C, preferably 47°C to 120°C, more preferably 60°C to 110°C, and at a pressure of 0.5 bar to 40 bar, preferably in the range from 0.75 bar to 5 bar, more preferably in the range from 1 bar to 2 bar, more preferably in the range from 1 bar to 1.5 bar, yet more preferably at ambient pressure (1 bar).

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The reaction column RR_A comprises in a preferred embodiment at least one evaporator which is in particular selected from intermediate evaporators V_{ZA} and bottoms evaporators V_{SA} . The reaction column RR_A particularly preferably comprises at least one bottoms evaporator V_{SA} .

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According to the invention “intermediate evaporators” V_{ZA} and V_{ZB} are to be understood as meaning evaporators arranged above the bottom of the respective column, in particular above the

bottom of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B . They are used in particular to evaporate crude product RP_A/RP_B .

5 According to the invention "intermediate evaporators" V_{SA} and V_{SB} are to be understood as meaning evaporators which heat the bottom of the respective column, in particular above the bottom of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B . These evaporate bottoms product stream S_{AP}/S_{BP} .

10 An evaporator is typically arranged outside the respective reaction column or rectification column. The mixture to be evaporated in the evaporator is withdrawn via a takeoff from the column and supplied to the at least one evaporator. In the case of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B intermediate evaporation of the crude product RP_A/RP_B comprises withdrawal thereof and supply thereof to at least one intermediate evaporator V_{ZA}/V_{ZB} . The evaporated mixture is recycled back into the respective column optionally with a residual proportion of liquid via a feed. When the evaporator is an intermediate evaporator, i.e. an intermediate evaporator V_{ZA}/V_{ZB} is especially concerned, the
15 takeoff by means of which the respective mixture is withdrawn and supplied to the evaporator is a sidestream takeoff and the feed by means of which the evaporated respective mixture is sent back to the column is a sidestream feed. When the evaporator is a bottoms evaporator, i.e. heats the column bottom, i.e. a bottoms evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} is especially concerned, at least a portion of the bottoms takeoff stream, in particular S_{AP}/S_{BP} , is supplied to the bottoms evaporator V_S , evaporated
20 and recycled back into the respective column in the region of the bottom. However, it is alternatively also possible for example on a suitable tray when using an intermediate evaporator or in the bottom of the respective column to provide tubes which are traversed by the respective compressed vapour stream S_{B3} or a heating medium W_1 . In this case the evaporation is carried out on the tray or in the bottom of the column. However, it is preferable to arrange the evaporator
25 outside the respective column.

Suitable evaporators employable as intermediate evaporators and bottoms evaporators include for example natural circulation evaporators, forced circulation evaporators, forced circulation evaporators with decompression, steam boilers, falling film evaporators or thin film evaporators.
30 Heat exchangers typically employed for evaporators in the case of natural circulation evaporators and forced circulation evaporators are shell and tube or plate apparatuses. When using a shell and tube exchanger the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} /the heating medium W_1 may flow through the tubes with the mixture to be evaporated flowing around the tubes or else the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} /the heating medium W_1 may flow around the tubes with the mixture to be evaporated
35 flowing through the tubes. In the case of a falling film evaporator the mixture to be evaporated is typically added as a thin film on the inside of a tube and the tube is heated externally. In contrast to a falling film evaporator a thin film evaporator additionally comprises a rotor with wipers which distributes the liquid to be evaporated on the inner wall of the tube to form a thin film.

In addition to the recited evaporator types it is also possible to employ any desired further evaporator type known to those skilled in the art and suitable for use on a rectification column.

When the evaporator operated with the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} /the heating medium W_1 as heating vapour is an intermediate evaporator it is preferable when the intermediate evaporator is arranged in the stripping portion of the reaction column RR_A in the region of the feed point of the reactant stream S_{AE1} or in the case of the reaction column RR_B in the region of the feed point of the reactant stream S_{BE1} . This makes it possible to introduce a predominant proportion of the heat energy via the intermediate evaporator. It is thus possible for example to introduce more than 80% of the energy via the intermediate evaporator. According to the invention the intermediate evaporator is preferably arranged and/or configured such that it introduces more than 50%, in particular more than 75%, of the total energy required for the distillation.

When using an intermediate evaporator it is especially advantageous when the intermediate evaporator is arranged such that the reaction column RR_A/RR_B has 1 to 50 theoretical trays below the intermediate evaporator and 1 to 200 theoretical trays above the intermediate evaporator. It is especially preferred when the reaction column RR_A/RR_B has 2 to 10 theoretical trays below the intermediate evaporator and 20 to 50 theoretical trays above the intermediate evaporator.

The sidestream takeoff stream by means of which the crude product RP_A/RP_B is supplied to the intermediate evaporator V_{ZA}/V_{ZB} and the sidestream feed by means of which the evaporated crude product RP_A/RP_B from the intermediate evaporator V_{ZA}/V_{ZB} is sent back to the respective reaction column RR_A/RR_B may be positioned between the same trays of the reaction column. However, it is also possible for the sidestream takeoff and the site stream feed to be at different heights.

In a preferred embodiment when using an intermediate evaporator RR_A/RR_B the diameter of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B above the intermediate evaporator RR_A/RR_B is greater than the diameter of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B below the intermediate evaporator RR_A/RR_B . This has the advantage of allowing capital expenditure savings.

Such an intermediate evaporator V_{ZA} can convert liquid crude product RP_A present in the reaction column RR_A comprising M_AOR , water, ROH, M_AOH into the gaseous state, thus improving the efficiency of the reaction according to step (a1) of the process according to the invention.

By arranging one or more intermediate evaporators V_{ZA} in the upper region of the reaction column RR_A the dimensions in the lower region of the reaction column RR_A can be reduced. In the embodiment having at least one, preferably two or more, intermediate evaporators V_{ZA} it is also possible to introduce substreams of the ROH in liquid form in the upper region of the reaction column RR_A .

According to the invention bottoms evaporators are arranged at the bottom of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B and are then referred to as " V_{SA}/V_{SB} ". Bottoms product stream S_{AP}/S_{BP} present in the reaction column RR_A/RR_B may be passed into such a bottoms evaporator and ROH at least partially removed therefrom to obtain a bottoms product stream S_{AP^*} having an elevated mass fraction of M_{AOR} compared to S_{AP} /to obtain a bottoms product stream S_{BP^*} having an elevated mass fraction of M_{BOR} compared to S_{BP} .

In step (a1) of the process according to the invention a bottoms product stream S_{AP} comprising ROH and M_{AOR} is withdrawn at the lower end of the reaction column RR_A .

It is preferable when the reaction column RR_A comprises at least one bottoms evaporator V_{SA} through which the bottoms product stream S_{AP} is then at least partially passed to at least partially remove ROH, thus affording a bottoms product stream S_{AP^*} having an elevated mass fraction of M_{AOR} compared to S_{AP} . In this further preferred embodiment it is yet more advantageous when in step (d) S_{B3} or W_1 is at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator V_{SA} and the energy from S_{B3}/W_1 is transferred to the bottoms product stream S_{AP} , especially by utilizing S_{B3}/W_1 to heat the evaporator V_{A1} . W_1 is a heat transfer medium distinct from RP_A , S_{AE1} , S_{AE2} , S_{AP} , S_{AB} , RP_B , S_{BE1} , S_{BE2} , S_{BP} or S_{BB} which has contacted S_{B3} so that energy is transferred from S_{B3} to the at least one heat transfer medium W_1 (see section 4.5).

The mass fraction of M_{AOR} in the bottoms product stream S_{AP^*} is especially elevated compared to the mass fraction of M_{AOR} in the bottoms product stream S_{AP} by at least 1%, preferably by $\geq 2\%$, more preferably by $\geq 5\%$, yet more preferably by $\geq 10\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 20\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 30\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 40\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 50\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 100\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 150\%$.

It is preferable when S_{AP} or, if at least one bottoms evaporator V_{SA} through which the bottoms product stream S_{AP} is at least partially passed to at least partially remove ROH is used, S_{AP^*} has a mass fraction of M_{AOR} in ROH in the range from 1% to 50% by weight, preferably 5% to 32% by weight, more preferably 15% to 32% by weight, most preferably 30% to 32% by weight, in each case based on the total mass of S_{AP} .

The mass fraction of residual water in S_{AP}/S_{AP^*} is preferably $< 1\%$ by weight, preferably $< 0.1\%$ by weight, more preferably $< 0.01\%$ by weight, based on the total mass of S_{AP} .

The mass fraction of reactant M_{AOH} in S_{AP}/S_{AP^*} is preferably $< 1\%$ by weight, preferably $< 0.1\%$ by weight, more preferably $< 0.01\%$ by weight, based on the total mass of S_{AP} .

4.2 Step (a2) of the process according to the invention (optional)

According to the invention step (a2) is optionally performed. In optional step (a2) which is carried out simultaneously with and spatially separate from step (a1) of the process according to the invention a reactant stream **S_{BE1}** comprising ROH is reacted with a reactant stream **S_{BE2}** comprising M_BOH in countercurrent in a reactive rectification column **RR_B** to afford a crude product **RP_B** comprising M_BOR, water, ROH, M_BOH.

In step (a2) of the process according to the invention a bottoms product stream **S_{BP}** comprising ROH and M_BOR is withdrawn at the lower end of **RR_B**. A vapour stream **S_{BB}** comprising water and ROH is withdrawn at the top end of **RR_B**.

M_A is selected from sodium, potassium, preferably potassium.

The reactant stream **S_{BE1}** comprises ROH. In a preferred embodiment the mass fraction of ROH in **S_{BE1}** is $\geq 95\%$ by weight, yet more preferably $\geq 99\%$ by weight, wherein **S_{BE1}** otherwise comprises especially water.

The alcohol ROH employed in step (a2) of the process according to the invention as reactant stream **S_{BE1}** may also be commercially available alcohol having an alcohol mass fraction of more than 99.8% by weight and a mass fraction of water of up to 0.2% by weight.

The reactant stream **S_{BE1}** is preferably added in vaporous form.

The reactant stream **S_{BE2}** comprises M_BOH. In a preferred embodiment **S_{BE2}** comprises not only M_BOH but also at least one further compound selected from water, ROH. It is yet more preferable when **S_{BE2}** comprises water in addition to M_BOH, thus rendering **S_{BE2}** an aqueous solution of M_BOH.

When the reactant stream **S_{BE2}** comprises M_BOH and water the mass fraction of M_BOH based on the total weight of the aqueous solution forming **S_{BE2}** is especially in the range from 10% to 55% by weight, preferably from 15% to 54% by weight, more preferably from 30% to 53% by weight and particularly preferably from 45% to 52% by weight. It is most preferable when the proportion of M_BOH in the aqueous solution is 50% by weight.

When the reactant stream **S_{BE2}** comprises M_BOH and ROH the mass fraction of M_BOH in ROH based on the total weight of the solution forming **S_{BE2}** is especially in the range from 10% to 55% by weight, preferably from 15% to 54% by weight, more preferably from 30% to 53% by weight and particularly preferably from 45% to 52% by weight.

In the particular case in which the reactant stream **S_{BE2}** comprises both water and ROH in addition to M_BOH it is particularly preferable when the mass fraction of M_BOH in ROH and water based on

the total weight of the solution forming S_{BE2} is especially in the range from 10% to 55% by weight, preferably from 15% to 54% by weight, more preferably from 30% to 53% by weight and particularly preferably from 45% to 52% by weight.

- 5 Step (a2) of the process according to the invention is performed in a reactive rectification column (or "reaction column") RR_B . Preferred embodiments of the reaction column RR_B are described in section 4.1.

- According to the invention "reaction of a reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH with a reactant
10 stream S_{BE2} comprising M_BOH in countercurrent" is especially achieved as a result of the feed point for at least a portion of the reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH in step (a2) being arranged below the feed point for the reactant stream S_{BE2} comprising M_BOH on the reaction column RR_B .

- The reaction column RR_B preferably comprises at least 2, in particular 15 to 40, theoretical trays
15 between the feed point of the reactant stream S_{BE1} and the feed point of the reactant stream S_{BE2} .

- The reaction column RR_B is preferably operated as a pure stripping column. Accordingly the reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH is especially supplied in vaporous form in the lower region of the reaction column RR_B . Step (a2) of the process according to the invention also comprises the
20 case where a portion of the reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH is added in vaporous form below the feed point of the reactant stream S_{BE2} comprising aqueous sodium hydroxide solution M_BOH but nevertheless at the upper end or in the region of the upper end of the reaction column RR_B . This makes it possible to reduce the dimensions of the lower region of the reaction column RR_B . When a portion of the reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH, in particular methanol, is added
25 especially in vaporous form at the upper end or in the region of the upper end of the reaction column RR_B only a fraction of 10% to 70% by weight, preferably of 30% to 50% by weight, (in each case based on the total amount of the alcohol ROH employed in step (a2)) is introduced at the lower end of the reaction column RR_B and the remaining fraction is added in vaporous form in a single stream or divided into a plurality of substreams preferably 1 to 10 theoretical trays,
30 particularly preferably 1 to 3 theoretical trays, below the feed point of the reactant stream S_{BE2} comprising M_BOH .

- In the reaction column RR_B the reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH is then reacted with the reactant stream S_{BE2} comprising M_BOH according to the reaction <1>described hereinabove to
35 afford M_BOR and H_2O , wherein these products are present in admixture with the reactants ROH and M_BOH since an equilibrium reaction is concerned. Accordingly a crude product RP_B which contains not only the products M_BOR and water but also ROH and M_BOH is obtained in the reaction column RR_B in step (a2) of the process according to the invention.

The bottoms product stream **S_{BP}** comprising ROH and M_BOR is obtained and then withdrawn at the lower end of **RR_B**.

5 A water-containing alcohol stream, described hereinabove as "vapour stream **S_{BB}** comprising water and ROH", is withdrawn at the upper end of **RR_B**, preferably at the column top of **RR_B**.

This vapour stream **S_{BB}** comprising water and ROH is supplied to step (b) of the process according to the invention. Said stream is mixed with **S_{AB}** before being supplied to step (b) of the process according to the invention or is not, i.e. is supplied to step (b) of the process according to the
 10 invention separately from **S_{AB}**. It is preferable when the vapour stream **S_{BB}** is mixed with **S_{AB}** and then the mixture supplied to step (b) of the process according to the invention. As part of at least one of the streams **S_{B2}**, **S_{B3}**, **S_{B4}** a portion of the alcohol obtained in the distillation in step (b) may be supplied to the reaction column **RR_B** as reactant stream **S_{BE1}**.

15 The amount of the alcohol ROH comprised by the reactant stream **S_{BE1}** is preferably chosen such that said alcohol also serves as a solvent for the alkali metal alkoxide M_BOR obtained in the bottoms product stream **S_{BP}**. The amount of the alcohol ROH in the reactant stream **S_{BE1}** is preferably chosen to achieve in the bottom of reaction column the desired concentration of the alkali metal alkoxide solution which is withdrawn as a bottoms product stream **S_{BP}** comprising ROH
 20 and M_BOR.

In a preferred embodiment of the process according to the invention, and especially in the cases where **S_{BE2}** contains water in addition to M_BOH, the ratio of the total weight (masses; units: kg) of alcohol employed in step (a2) as reactant stream **S_{BE1}** ROH to the total weight (masses; unit: kg) of
 25 M_BOH employed in step (a2) as reactant stream **S_{BE2}** is 4: 1 to 50: 1, more preferably from 9: 1 to 48: 1, yet more preferably from 13 : 1 to 35: 1, yet still more preferably 22: 1 to 30: 1.

The reaction column **RR_B** is operated with or without, preferably without, reflux.

30 "Without reflux" is to be understood as meaning that the vapour stream **S_{BB}** withdrawn at the upper end of **RR_B** comprising water and ROH is completely supplied to the rectification column **RD_A** according to step (b). The vapour stream **S_{BB}** comprising water and ROH is preferably supplied to the rectification column **RD_A** in vaporous form.

35 "With reflux" is to be understood as meaning that the vapour stream **S_{BB}** withdrawn at the upper end of the respective column, reaction column **RR_B** in step (a2), comprising water and ROH is not completely discharged, i.e. is not completely supplied to the rectification column **RD_A** in step (b), but rather is at least partially, preferably partially, sent back to the respective column, reaction column **RR_B** in step (a2), as reflux. In the cases where such a reflux is established the reflux ratio is
 40 preferably 0.05 to 0.99, more preferably 0.1 to 0.9, yet more preferably 0.11 to 0.34, particularly

preferably 0.14 to 0.27 and very particularly preferably 0.17 to 0.24. A reflux may be established by attaching at the top of the respective column, reaction column **RR_B** in step (a2), a condenser **K_{RRB}** in which the vapour stream **S_{BB}** is at least partially condensed and sent back to the respective column, reaction column **RR_B** in step (a2).

5

In the embodiment in which a reflux is established for the reaction column **RR_B** the M_BOH employed in step (a2) as reactant stream **S_{BE2}** may also be at least partially mixed with the reflux stream and the resulting mixture thus supplied to step (a2).

- 10 Step (a2) of the process according to the invention is carried out especially at a temperature in the range of 45°C to 150°C, preferably 47°C to 120°C, more preferably 60°C to 110°C, and at a pressure of 0.5 bar to 40 bar, preferably in the range from 0.75 bar to 5 bar, more preferably in the range from 1 bar to 2 bar, more preferably in the range from 1 bar to 1.5 bar, yet more preferably at ambient pressure (1 bar).

15

The reaction column **RR_B** comprises in a preferred embodiment at least one evaporator which is in particular selected from intermediate evaporators **V_{ZB}** and bottoms evaporators **V_{SB}**. The reaction column **RR_B** particularly preferably comprises at least one bottoms evaporator **V_{SB}**.

- 20 Such an intermediate evaporator **V_{ZB}** can convert liquid crude product **RP_B** present in the reaction column **RR_B** comprising M_BOR, water, ROH, M_BOH into the gaseous state, thus improving the efficiency of the reaction according to step (a2) of the process according to the invention.

- By arranging one or more intermediate evaporators **V_{ZB}** in the upper region of the reaction column **RR_B** the dimensions in the lower region of the reaction column **RR_B** can be reduced. In the embodiment having at least one, preferably two or more, intermediate evaporators **V_{ZB}** it is also possible to introduce substreams of the ROH in liquid form in the upper region of the reaction column **RR_B**.

- 30 In step (a2) of the process according to the invention a bottoms product stream **S_{BP}** comprising ROH and M_BOR is withdrawn at the lower end of the reaction column **RR_B**.

- It is preferable when the reaction column **RR_B** comprises at least one bottoms evaporator **V_{SB}** through which the bottoms product stream **S_{BP}** is then at least partially passed to at least partially remove ROH, thus affording a bottoms product stream **S_{BP}*** having an elevated mass fraction of M_BOR compared to **S_{BP}**. In this further preferred embodiment it is yet more advantageous when in step (d) **S_{B3}** or **W₁** is at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator **V_{SB}** and the energy from **S_{B3}/W₁** is transferred to the bottoms product stream **S_{BP}**, especially by utilizing **S_{B3}/W₁** to heat the evaporator **V_{B1}**.

40

The mass fraction of $M_{B}OR$ in the bottoms product stream S_{BP} is especially elevated compared to the mass fraction of $M_{B}OR$ in the bottoms product stream S_{BP} by at least 1%, preferably by $\geq 2\%$, more preferably by $\geq 5\%$, yet more preferably by $\geq 10\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 20\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 30\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 40\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 50\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 100\%$, yet still more preferably by $\geq 150\%$.

It is preferable when S_{BP} or, if at least one bottoms evaporator V_{SB} through which the bottoms product stream S_{BP} is at least partially passed to at least partially remove ROH is used, S_{BP} has a mass fraction of $M_{B}OR$ in ROH in the range from 1% to 50% by weight, preferably 5% to 32% by weight, more preferably 15% to 32% by weight, most preferably 30% to 32% by weight, in each case based on the total mass of S_{BP} .

The mass fraction of residual water in S_{BP}/S_{BP} is preferably $< 1\%$ by weight, preferably $< 0.1\%$ by weight, more preferably $< 0.01\%$ by weight, based on the total mass of S_{BP} .

The mass fraction of reactant $M_{B}OH$ in S_{BP}/S_{BP} is preferably $< 1\%$ by weight, preferably $< 0.1\%$ by weight, more preferably $< 0.01\%$ by weight, based on the total mass of S_{BP} .

In the embodiments of the present process in which step (a2) is also performed it is preferable when the bottoms product stream S_{AP} is at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator V_{SA} and ROH is at least partially removed from S_{AP} to afford a bottoms product stream S_{AP} having an elevated mass fraction of $M_{A}OR$ compared to S_{AP} and/or, preferably and, the bottoms product stream S_{BP} is at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator V_{SB} and ROH is at least partially removed from S_{BP} to afford a bottoms product stream S_{BP} having an elevated mass fraction of $M_{B}OR$ compared to S_{BP} . In this further preferred embodiment it is yet more preferable when in step (d) the energy from S_{B3} is transferred to the bottoms product stream S_{AP} and/or, preferably and, the bottoms product stream S_{BP} , in particular utilized in S_{B3} for heating the bottoms evaporator V_{SA} and/or, preferably and, the bottoms evaporator V_{SB} . This utilization of the energy from S_{B3} may be effected directly or indirectly.

In the embodiments of the present invention in which it is carried out step (a2) of the process according to the invention is performed simultaneously with and spatially separate from step (a1). Spatial separation is ensured by performing steps (a1) and (a2) in the two reaction columns RR_A and RR_B .

In an advantageous embodiment of the invention the reaction columns RR_A and RR_B are accommodated in one column shell, wherein the column is at least partially subdivided by at least one dividing wall. According to the invention such a column comprising at least one dividing wall is referred to as a "TRD". Such dividing wall columns are familiar to those skilled in the art and described for example in US 2,295,256, EP 0 122 367 A2, EP 0 126 288 A2, WO 2010/097318 A1

sowie von I. Dejanović, Lj. Matijašević, Ž. Olujić, *Chemical Engineering and Processing* **2010**, 49, 559-580. In the dividing wall columns suitable for the process according to the invention the dividing walls preferably extend to the floor and, in particular, preferably span at least a quarter, more preferably at least a third, yet more preferably at least half, yet more preferably at least two thirds, yet still more preferably at least three quarters, of the column by height They divide the columns into at least two reaction spaces in which spatially separate reactions may be carried out. The reaction spaces provided by the at least one dividing wall may be of identical or different sizes.

In this embodiment the bottoms product streams S_{AP} and S_{BP} may be separately withdrawn in the respective regions separated by the dividing wall and preferably passed through the bottoms evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} attached for each reaction space formed by the at least one reaction wall in which ROH is at least partially removed from S_{AP}/S_{BP} to afford S_{AP^*}/S_{BP^*} .

4.3 Step (b) of the process according to the invention

In step (b) of the process according to the invention the vapour stream S_{AB} is passed into a rectification column RD_A and in RD_A separated into an ROH-comprising vapour stream S_{B2} having a pressure p_{B2} and a temperature T_{B2} at the top of RD_A and a water stream S_W at the bottom of RD_A .

In the optional embodiment of the process according to the invention in which step (a2) is performed the vapour stream S_{BB} is likewise passed into a rectification column RD_A and in RD_A separated into an ROH-comprising vapour stream S_{B2} having a pressure p_{B2} and a temperature T_{B2} at the top of RD_A and a water stream S_W at the bottom of RD_A . The vapour stream S_{BB} is passed into a rectification column RD_A in admixture with S_{AB} or separately from S_{AB} . The vapour stream S_{BB} is preferably mixed with S_{AB} and then passed into a rectification column RD_A .

In one embodiment of the present invention the vapour streams S_{AB} and optionally S_{BB} may be compressed before they are passed to the rectification column RD_A . This may be achieved via an optional compressor VD_{AB1} .

It will be appreciated that in the embodiments in which S_{BB} is passed into a rectification column RD_A separately from S_{AB} , S_{AB} and S_{BB} undergo mixing in the rectification column RD_A so that in any case performance of step (b) results in separation into an ROH-comprising vapour stream S_{B2} at the top of RD_A and a water stream S_W at the bottom of RD_A .

The pressure of the vapour stream S_{B2} is referred to as " p_{B2} " and its temperature as " T_{B2} ". This relates in particular to the pressure and temperature of S_{B2} before S_{B2} has been subjected to step (c) of the process according to the invention.

It is preferable when the water stream S_W is also withdrawn at the bottom of the rectification column RD_A in step (b).

Any desired rectification column known to those skilled in the art may be employed as rectification column RD_A in step (b) of the process according to the invention. The reaction column RD_A preferably contains internals. Suitable internals are, for example, trays, unstructured packings or structured packings. Typically employed trays are bubble cap trays, sieve trays, valve trays, tunnel cap trays or slit trays. Unstructured packings are generally random packings. Typically employed packings are Raschig rings, Pall rings, Berl saddles or Intalox® saddles. Structured packings are for example marketed under the trade name Mellapack® from Sulzer. Further suitable internals other than the recited internals are known to those skilled in the art and may likewise be used.

Preferred internals have a low specific pressure drop per theoretical separation stage. By way of example structured packings and random packings have a markedly lower pressure drop per theoretical separation stage than trays. This has the advantage that the pressure drop in the rectification column remains as low as possible and thus the mechanical power of the compressor and the temperature of the alcohol/water mixture to be evaporated remains low.

When the rectification column RD_A contains structured packings or unstructured packings these may be divided or in the form of an uninterrupted packing. However, typically at least two packings are provided, one packing above the feed point of the vapour stream S_{AB} /the feed points of the two vapour streams S_{AB} and S_{BB} and a packing below the point of the vapour stream S_{AB} /the feed points of the two vapour streams S_{AB} and S_{BB} . If an unstructured packing is used, for example a random packing, the packings typically rest on a suitable sieve tray or mesh tray.

In the integrated system comprising reaction column RR_A (or in the embodiment in which step (a2) is performed reaction column RR_A and reaction column RR_B) and rectification column RD_A in the process according to the invention the rectification column RD_A is preferably operated at a pressure selected such that the pressure gradient between the columns can be established with little cost and complexity in the case of vapour compression according to step (c).

The alcohol ROH is consumed in the process according to the invention and especially in a continuous process mode therefore requires replacement with fresh alcohol ROH.

Supply of the fresh alcohol ROH is thus especially carried out directly as reactant stream S_{AE1} comprising ROH into the reaction column RR_A or in the embodiments in which step (a2) is performed into the reaction columns RR_A and RR_B .

In the process according to the invention it is further preferable to employ the ROH-comprising vapour stream S_{B2} partially as reactant stream S_{AE1} in step (a1) and optionally as reactant stream

S_{BE1} in step (a2). The compressed vapour stream **S_{B3}** may alternatively or in addition be employed partially as reactant stream **S_{AE1}** in step (a1) and optionally as reactant stream **S_{BE1}** in step (a2). In this preferred embodiment it is yet more preferable when the fresh alcohol ROH is added to the rectification column **RD_A**.

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When the fresh alcohol ROH is added to the rectification column **RD_A** it is preferably supplied either in the rectifying section of the rectification column **RD_A** or directly at the top of the rectification column **RD_A**. The optimal feed point depends on the water content of the employed fresh alcohol and also on the desired residual water content in the vapour stream **S_{B2}**. The higher the a portion of water in the employed alcohol and the higher the purity requirements of the vapour stream **S_{B2}** the more advantageous is a feed a number of theoretical trays below the top of the rectification column **RD_A**. Up to 20 theoretical trays below the top of the rectification column **RD_A**, in particular 1 to 5 theoretical trays, are preferred.

15 When the fresh alcohol ROH is added to the rectification column **RD_A** it is added at the top of the rectification column **RD_A** at temperatures up to boiling point, preferably at room temperature. A dedicated feed may be provided for the fresh alcohol or else when a portion of the alcohol withdrawn at the top of the rectification column **RD_A** is recycled may be mixed therewith after condensation and supplied to the rectification column **RD_A** together. In this case it is particularly
20 preferable when the fresh alcohol is added to a condensate container in which the alcohol condensed from the vapour stream **S_{B2}** is collected.

In an advantageous embodiment of the invention the reaction column **RR_A** of step (a1), or reaction columns **RR_A** and **RR_B** in the above-described preferred embodiment in which step (a2) is
25 performed, and the rectification column **RD_A** of step (b) for separation of the vapour stream **S_{B1}** are accommodated in one column shell, wherein the column is at least partially subdivided by at least one dividing wall, or in the above-described preferred embodiment in which step (a2) is performed, by at least two dividing walls, wherein the at least one dividing wall or the at least two dividing walls extend to the bottom of the column. As described at point 4.2 this is then a dividing wall column
30 again.

In this case the reaction to afford the crude product **RP_A** according to step (a1) or the crude products **RP_A** and **RP_B** according to steps (a1) and (a2) are performed in one part of the TRD, wherein the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** and optionally the reactant stream **S_{BE2}** are added below but a
35 similar height to the upper end of the dividing wall and the reactant stream **S_{AE1}** and optionally the reactant stream **S_{BE1}** are added in vaporous form at the lower end. The alcohol/water mixture formed above the feed point of the reactant stream is then distributed above the dividing wall over the entire column region serving as the rectification portion of the rectification column **RD_A**. The second lower portion of the column separated by the dividing wall is the stripping portion of the
40 rectification column **RD_A**. The energy required for the distillation is then supplied via an evaporator

at the lower end of the second portion of the column separated by the dividing wall, wherein this evaporator may be conventionally heated or heated with the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} . When the evaporator is conventionally heated an intermediate evaporator heated with a compressed vapour stream S_{B3} may additionally be provided.

5

The vapour stream S_{B2} comprising ROH is then withdrawn at the top of the rectification column RD_A after step (b) of the process according to the invention. The preferred mass fraction of ROH in this vapour stream S_{B2} is $\geq 99\%$ by weight, preferably $\geq 99.6\%$ by weight, more preferably $\geq 99.9\%$ by weight, wherein the remainder is especially water.

10

A water stream S_W which may contain $< 1\%$ by weight of alcohol is obtained at the bottom of RD_A .

In the context of the present invention the withdrawal of the ROH-comprising vapour stream S_{B2} at the top of the rectification column RD_A is to be understood as meaning that the vapour stream S_{B2} is withdrawn above the internals in the rectification column RD_A as a top stream or as a sidestream. The preferred withdrawal of the stream S_W containing substantially water at the bottom of the rectification column RD_A is typically carried out at the lower bottom of the rectification column RD_A but the withdrawal may also be carried out via a sidestream takeoff in the bottom.

20

4.4 Step (c) of the process according to the invention

In step (c) of the process according to the invention at least a portion of the vapour stream S_{B2} is compressed. This affords a vapour stream S_{B3} which is compressed with respect to S_{B2} . The pressure of the vapour stream S_{B3} is referred to as " p_{B3} " and its temperature as " T_{B3} ".

25

The pressure p_{B3} of S_{B3} is higher, preferably 1 to 10 bar higher, more preferably 3 to 6 bar higher, yet more preferably 5 bar higher, than the pressure p_{B2} of S_{B2} and the temperature T_{B3} of S_{B3} is higher, preferably 10°C to 150°C , preferably 50°C to 100°C , yet more preferably 95°C , than the temperature T_{B2} of S_{B2} .

30

The compressing of the vapour stream S_{B2} in step (c) may be carried out in any desired manner known to those skilled in the art. The compression can therefore be performed for example as a single-stage or multi-stage compression, preferably a multi-stage compression. A multi-stage compression may employ a plurality of compressors of the same type or compressors of different types. The use of single-stage compression or multi-stage compression depends on the pressure to which the vapour S_{B2} is to be compressed.

35

In a preferred embodiment of the process according to the invention 10% to 90% by weight, preferably 20% to 80% by weight, more preferably 30% to 70% by weight, yet more preferably 40%

40

to 60% by weight, yet still more preferably 50% by weight, of the vapour stream S_{B2} is employed as reactant stream S_{AE1} or, when step (a2) is performed, as reactant stream S_{AE1} and/or reactant stream S_{BE1} .

- 5 It is advantageous when at least the portion employed as reactant stream S_{AE1} and/or reactant stream S_{BE1} is compressed (precompressed) with a first precompressor VD_{AB2} . In this preferred embodiment the compressor VD_{AB1} as described hereinabove may also be employed alternatively or in addition to ensure this precompression.
- 10 In this preferred embodiment the remaining portion of the vapour stream S_{B2} , i.e. the portion not used as reactant stream S_{AE1} and/or reactant stream S_{BE1} , is then further compressed and employed in step (d) according to the invention. This additional compression is performed in particular with at least one compressor VD_1 additional to VD_{AB1} and VD_{AB2} .
- 15 The temperature T_{B3} and the pressure p_{B3} to which S_{B3} is compressed in step (c) is adjusted depending on which of RP_A , S_{AE1} , S_{AE2} , S_{AP} , S_{AB} in step (a1) or, when step (a2) is performed, which of RP_A , S_{AE1} , S_{AE2} , S_{AP} , S_{AB} , RP_B , S_{BE1} , S_{BE2} , S_{BP} , S_{BB} the energy is to be transferred to. It will be appreciated that when one of these components for example is to be heated with S_{B3} the temperature T_{B3} of S_{B3} at the end of step (c) must then be higher than the temperature of the
- 20 component to be heated in step (d). This can be adjusted by a person skilled in the art according to his knowledge of the art.

The same applies to the pressure p_3 to which S_{B3} is to be adjusted. This too can be adjusted by a person skilled in the art according to the requirements in step (d).

25

When energy from the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} is to be transferred to the crude product RP_A for example and in particular the crude product RP_A is to be heated via an intermediate evaporator V_{ZA} attached to the reaction column RR_A heating of the intermediate evaporator V_{ZA} requires a smaller pressure difference to be overcome than when energy from the vapour stream

30 S_{B3} is employed in step (d) of the process according to the invention for heating an evaporator V_{SA} at the bottom of the reaction column RR_A with which S_{AP} is then heated.

The larger pressure difference to be overcome may be overcome using additional compressor stages or using a stronger compressor. However, additional compressor stages are typically

35 employed.

Any desired compressor known to those skilled in the art and capable of compressing gas streams is suitable as a compressor in the process according to the invention, in particular for compressing the vapour stream S_{B2} . Suitable compressors are for example single-stage or multi-stage turbines,

40 piston compressors, screw compressors, centrifugal compressors or axial compressors.

In a multi-stage compression, compressors suitable for the respective pressure stages to be overcome are employed.

5 4.5 Step (d) of the process according to the invention

In step (d) of the process according to the invention energy is transferred from step **S_{B3}** to at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, preferably at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AP}**, yet more preferably **S_{AP}**. In the optional embodiment of the process according to the invention in which step (a2) is performed energy is alternatively or in addition, preferably in addition, transferred from **S_{B3}** to at least one of **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}**, preferably at least one of **RP_B**, **S_{BP}**, more preferably **S_{BP}**.

When step (a2) is performed step (d) of the process according to the invention accordingly comprises transferring energy from **S_{B3}** to at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}**, preferably at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AP}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BP}**, preferably to both **S_{AP}** and **S_{BP}**.

This affords a vapour **S_{B4}** having a lower energy content than **S_{B3}**. This is to be understood as meaning in particular that for the pressure **p_{B4}** of **S_{B4}** and the temperature **T_{B4}** of **S_{B4}**: **p_{B4} ≤ p_{B3}** and **T_{B4} < T_{B3}**. It is yet more preferable when **T_{B2} < T_{B4}** and **p_{B2} < p_{B4}**, so that **T_{B2} < T_{B4} < T_{B3}** and **p_{B2} < p_{B4} ≤ p_{B3}**.

This is to be understood as meaning in particular that **S_{B3}** is used to heat at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, preferably at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AP}**, yet more preferably **S_{AP}**.

In the optional embodiment of the process according to the invention in which step (a2) is performed this is to be understood as meaning in particular that alternatively or in addition, preferably in addition, **S_{B3}** is used to heat at least one of **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}**, preferably at least one of **RP_B**, **S_{BP}**, preferably **S_{BP}**.

When step (a2) is performed it is yet more preferable to use **S_{B3}** to heat at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}**, preferably at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AP}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BP}**, preferably both **S_{AP}** and **S_{BP}**.

Accordingly after performing step (c) of the process according to the invention the temperature **T_{B3}** of **S_{B3}** is preferably higher than that of a component selected from **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}** which is heated by **S_{B3}** in step (d).

The transfer of energy to, preferably the heating of, at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}** by **S_{B3}** is preferably carried out directly or indirectly.

"Directly" is to be understood as meaning that **S_{B3}** is contacted with the at least one component selected from **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}** or, when step (a2) is performed, selected from **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}** so that heat from **S_{B3}** is transferred to the relevant at least one component.

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In the case of **S_{AP}**, **S_{BP}** this may be performed when **S_{B3}** is at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator **V_{SA}/V_{SB}** on the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B** and heats **S_{AP}/S_{BP}** therein.

Employable heat exchangers include the heat exchangers familiar to those skilled in the art.

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"Indirect" is to be understood as meaning in particular that **S_{B3}** is contacted with at least one heat transfer medium **W₁**, preferably via at least one heat exchanger **WT_x**, wherein the heat transfer medium is not **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}** or **S_{BB}**, i.e. is distinct therefrom, so that energy, preferably heat, is transferred from **S_{B3}** to the at least one heat transfer medium **W₁** and the heat is then transferred from **W₁** to the relevant at least one component selected from **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}** when **W₁** contacts the relevant component.

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In a further embodiment of the process according to the invention indirect heating of at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}** with **S_{B3}** may comprise transferring heat initially from **S_{B3}** to **W₁**, preferably by contacting via at least one heat exchanger **WT_x** and subsequently transferring from **W₁** to a further heat transfer medium **W₂** distinct from **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}** preferably by contacting via at least one heat exchanger **WT_y**. The last step comprises transferring the heat from **W₂** to at least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}**. It will be appreciated that still further heat transfer media **W₃**, **W₄**, **W₅** etc. may accordingly be employed in further embodiments of the present invention.

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Utilizable heat transfer medium **W₁** and further heat transfer media **W₂**, **W₃**, **W₄**, **W₅** include any heat transfer media known to those skilled in the art, preferably selected from the group consisting of water; alcohol-water solutions; salt-water solutions, also including ionic liquids such as for example LiBr solutions, dialkylimidazolium salts such as especially dialkylimidazolium dialkylphosphates; mineral oils, for example diesel oils, thermal oils such as for example silicone oils; biological oils such as for example limonenes; aromatic hydrocarbons such as for example dibenzyltoluene. The most preferred transfer medium **W₁** is water.

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Salt-water solutions that may be used are also described for example in DE 10 2005 028 451 A1 and WO 2006/134015 A1.

The transfer of energy from **S_{B3}** to the crude product **RP_A**, **RP_B** and/or at least one stream selected from **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}** is carried out by the processes known to those

skilled in the art and preferably by any of the embodiments recited hereinbelow under 4.5.1, 4.5.2, 4.5.3 and 4.5.4, wherein the embodiment recited under 4.5.4 is most preferred.

4.5.1) In the embodiment of the present invention in which in step (d) energy is transferred from **S_{B3}** to at least one of **RP_A** and/or **RP_B** this is preferably carried out such that the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B** has attached to it at least one intermediate evaporator **V_{ZA}/V_{ZB}** by means of which a liquid crude product **RP_A/RP_B** is evaporated inside the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B**. In this preferred embodiment this intermediate evaporator **V_{ZA}/V_{ZB}** in particular is heated with **S_{B3}** in the case of direct heating or heated with a heat transfer medium **W₁** distinct from **S_{B3}** in the case of indirect heating, wherein the heat transfer medium **W₁** has previously absorbed energy from **S_{B3}**.

4.5.2) In the embodiment of the present invention in which in step (d) energy is transferred from **S_{B3}** to the at least one reactant stream selected from **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}** this is preferably carried out such that the respective reactant stream passes through at least one heat exchanger **WT1** before it is passed into the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B**. **WT1** effects transfer of energy, preferably heat, from **S_{B3}** in the case of direct heating or from a heat transfer medium **W₁** distinct from **S_{B3}** in the case of indirect heating, wherein the heat transfer medium **W₁** has previously absorbed energy from **S_{B3}**, to at least one reactant stream **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**.

4.5.3) In the embodiment of the present invention in which in step (d) energy is transferred from **S_{B3}** to at least one vapour stream selected from **S_{AB}**, **S_{BB}** this is preferably carried out such that the respective vapour stream passes through a heat exchanger **WT2** before it is passed into the rectification column **RD_A**. **WT2** effects transfer of energy, preferably heat, from **S_{B3}** in the case of direct heating or from a heat transfer medium **W₁** distinct from **S_{B3}** in the case of indirect heating, wherein the heat transfer medium **W₁** has previously absorbed energy from **S_{B3}**, to the at least one vapour stream selected from **S_{AB}**, **S_{BB}**.

4.5.4) In the embodiment of the present invention in which in step (d) energy is transferred directly from **S_{B3}** to at least one bottoms product stream selected from **S_{AP}**, **S_{BP}** this is advantageously effected such that the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B** has attached to it at least one bottoms evaporator **V_{SA}/V_{SB}** through which **S_{B3}** is at least partially passed and through which **S_{AP}/S_{BP}** are at least partially passed after exiting the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B** so that energy, preferably heat, is transferred from **S_{B3}** to **S_{AP}/S_{BP}**, in particular so that **S_{AP}/S_{BP}** is at least partially evaporated, in particular ROH is at least partially evaporated from **S_{AP}/S_{BP}**, to afford a bottoms product stream **S_{AP}*/S_{BP}***.

In the embodiment of the present invention in which in step (d) energy is indirectly transferred from **S_{B3}** to at least one bottoms product stream selected from **S_{AP}**, **S_{BP}** this is advantageously effected such that preferably via a heat exchanger **S_{B3}** contacts a heat transfer medium **W₁** distinct from

RP_A , S_{AE1} , S_{AE2} , S_{AP} , S_{AB} , RP_B , S_{BE1} , S_{BE2} , S_{BP} or S_{BB} , preferably water, so that energy, preferably heat, is transferred from S_{B3} to the at least one heat transfer medium W_1

- and the reaction column RR_A/RR_B has attached to it at least one bottoms evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB}
- 5 through which W_1 is at least partially passed and through which S_{AP}/S_{BP} are at least partially passed after exiting the reaction column RR_A/RR_B so that energy, preferably heat, is transferred from W_1 to S_{AP}/S_{BP} , in particular so that S_{AP}/S_{BP} is at least partially evaporated, in particular ROH is at least partially evaporated from S_{AP}/S_{BP} , to afford a bottoms product stream S_{AP^*}/S_{BP^*} .
- 10 In the preferred embodiment according to 4.5.4 it is yet more preferable when in addition to the evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} at least one further conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA} on the reaction column RR_A/V_{KB} on the reaction column RR_B is employed and arranged at the bottom of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B . When the evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} directly or indirectly heated with vapour stream S_{B3} is likewise arranged at the bottom of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B the conventionally
- 15 heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} may for example be utilized to supply additional heat during operation of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B . However, the conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} is generally utilized to start up the reaction column RR_A/RR_B . During startup of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B there is still insufficient vapour S_{B3} to allow direct or indirect heating of the evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} and heat must therefore initially be supplied from an external source. Startup of the
- 20 rectification column RD_A is followed by an increase in the amount of vapour S_{B2} withdrawable at the top of the reaction column RD_A . This may then be compressed to afford S_{B3} and operation may be transferred to the evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} heated with the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} . It is thus possible to slowly start up the evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} which is heated with the vapour stream S_{B3} and correspondingly reduce the heating of the conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} or to wait until
- 25 a steady operating state has been established in the rectification column RR_A/RR_B and then switch from the conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} to the evaporator V_{SA}/V_{SB} heated with the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} .

- When the compressed vapour stream S_{B3} is used to heat an intermediate evaporator V_{ZA}/V_{ZB} as in
- 30 the embodiment of the present invention described under point 4.5.1 for example the additional conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} is utilized to introduce further heat into the reaction column RR_A/RR_B at the bottom of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B . In this case the conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} is operated over the entire operating duration of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B . Here too, startup of the reaction column RR_A/RR_B requires that a greater amount of heat
- 35 is initially introduced into the reaction column RR_A/RR_B via the conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} until the intermediate evaporator V_{ZA}/V_{ZB} can be provided with a sufficiently large vapour stream S_{B3} to effect heating thereof. The amount of heat introduced into the reaction column RR_A/RR_B with the conventionally heated evaporator V_{KA}/V_{KB} may then be reduced. When using an intermediate evaporator V_{ZA}/V_{ZB} it is alternatively also possible to employ two conventionally
- 40 heated evaporators V_{KA1} and V_{KA2}/V_{KB1} and V_{KB2} at the bottom of the respective reaction column

RR_A/RR_B. The additional conventionally heated evaporator **V_{KA2}/V_{KB2}** is then utilized to start up the column and the other conventionally heated evaporator **V_{KA1}/V_{KB1}** continues to be operated during operation of the reaction column **RR_A/RR_B**.

- 5 Step (d) of the process according to the invention reflects the unexpected effect of the present invention. The inventive process makes it possible to prevent the excess energy obtained during compression of the vapour stream **S_{B2}** to afford the compressed vapour stream **S_{B3}** from dissipating without being utilized but rather to employ it to operate the conversion in the reactive distillation. This results in a marked energy saving.

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4.6 Preferred step (e) of the process according to the invention

- In a preferred embodiment of the process according to the invention the vapour stream **S_{B4}** is used for heating the rectification column **RD_A** in a step (e). This may be achieved in particular when the lower end thereof has attached to it a bottoms evaporator **V_{SRD}** which heats the water stream **S_W** at the bottom of **RD_A**. The water stream **S_W** may thus be at least partially recycled back into the rectification column **RD_A**. Alternatively or in addition, preferably in addition, the vapour stream **S_{B4}** may also be recycled back into the rectification column **RD_A**, preferably at the top thereof. When the vapour stream **S_{B4}** is recycled into the rectification column **RD_A** it is preferably condensed and preferably added at the top of the rectification column **RD_A** at temperatures up to boiling point, preferably at room temperature. A dedicated feed may be provided for the vapour stream **S_{B4}** or else when a portion of the alcohol withdrawn at the top of the rectification column **RD_A** is recycled may be mixed therewith after condensation and supplied to the rectification column **RD_A** together. In this case it is particularly preferable when the vapour stream **S_{B4}** is added to a condensate container in which the alcohol condensed from the vapour stream **S_{B2}** is collected.

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When the vapour stream **S_{B4}** is employed in step (e) it is advantageous to compress said stream and at least one further compressor **VD_x** to obtain a vapour stream **S_{B5}** compressed with respect to **S_{B4}**.

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5. Preferred embodiments of the invention

- Figure 1 shows an embodiment <10> of the process according to the invention. It comprises a reaction column **RR_A** <100> which may optionally comprise stages above the reactant stream **S_{AE2}** <102>. At the top of the reaction column **RR_A** <100> an aqueous NaOH solution is added as reactant stream **S_{AE2}** <102>. It is alternatively also possible to add a methanolic KOH solution as reactant stream **S_{AE2}** <102> in order then to produce the corresponding potassium methoxide. Above the bottom of the reaction column **RR_A** <100> methanol is added in vaporious form as reactant stream **S_{AE1}** <103>. The product sodium methoxide dissolved in methanol is obtained at the bottom of the reaction column **RR_A** <100> as bottoms product stream **S_{AP}** <104>. The bottoms

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evaporator V_{SA} <105> and the optional evaporator V_{KA} <106> at the bottom of the column RR_A <100> are used to adjust the concentration of the sodium methoxide solution S_{AP} <104> to the desired value. The optional evaporator V_{KA} <106> is especially also used to start up the column RR_A <100>.

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At the top of the reaction column RR_A <100> a vapour stream S_{AB} <107> is withdrawn. At the top of the reaction column RR_A <100> a portion of the vapour stream S_{AB} <107> is condensed in the condenser K_{RRA} <108> and applied in liquid form to the top of the reaction column RR_A <100> as reflux. However, condenser K_{RRA} <108> and the adjustment of the reflux are optional.

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The vapour stream S_{AB} <107> is supplied via conduit <13> to a rectification column RD_A <300>.

At the top of the rectification column RD_A <300> methanol vapour S_{B2} <302> is discharged. Said vapour is then passed through the compressor VD_{AB2} <303> and partially recycled via conduit <31> to the reaction column RR_A <100> where it is employed as reactant stream S_{AE1} <103>. Compressor VD_{AB1} <301> may also be employed alternatively or in addition to the compressor VD_{AB2} <303>.

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The invention provides that after passage through the compressor VD_{AB2} <303> and precompression therein at least a portion of the methanol vapour S_{B2} <302> is passed to compressor VD_1 <401> where it is compressed to afford compressed vapour stream S_{B3} <403>. The vapour stream S_{B3} <403> heats the bottoms evaporator V_{SA} <105>. This may be effected through direct heating of bottoms evaporator V_{SA} <105> by S_{B3} <403> (not shown in figure 1). Heating is alternatively effected as shown in figure 1 by using heat exchanger WT_x <402> to transfer heat to a heat transfer medium (preferably water) W_1 <410> by means of which the bottoms evaporator V_{SA} <105> is in turn heated. The heat transfer medium (preferably water) W_1 <410> is circulated in the conduits <41> and <14> which may optionally also comprise conduits <141> and <411> for control purposes. After passage through the heat exchanger WT_x <402> a vapour stream S_{B4} <404> having a reduced energy content compared to S_{B3} <403> is obtained. S_{B4} <404> passes through an additional compressor VD_x <405> and is then utilized as vapour stream S_{B5} <409> compressed with respect to S_{B4} <404> for heating bottoms evaporator V_{SRD} <406> after which it is passed through an optional throttle <407> and optionally with fresh methanol <408> sent back to the rectification column RD_A <300> as reflux. At the bottom of the rectification column RD_A <300> a water stream S_W <304> is obtained.

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Figure 2 shows a further preferred embodiment of the present invention This corresponds to figure 1 with the exception that two reaction columns RR_A <100A> and RR_B <100B> are present and the corresponding constituents of the reaction columns RR_A <100A> and RR_B <100B> correspond to those specified in figure 1 for the reaction column RR_A <100> wherein each constituent has the further suffix "A"/"B" to signify affiliation to RR_A/RR_B . In reaction column RR_A <100A> a stream S_{AE2}

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<102A> comprising NaOH is added and in reaction column **RR_B** <100B> a stream **S_{BE2}** <102B> comprising KOH is added. Both reaction columns **RR_A** <100A> and **RR_B** <100B> may comprise additional stages above the feed of the alkali metal hydroxide solution but this is optional and not shown in figure 2. In contrast to figure 1 the conduits <14> and <41> have branchings which allow heat exchange between the vapour **S_{B3}** <403> with both evaporators **V_{SA}** <105A> and **V_{SB}** <105B>. An additional throttle <412> for control purposes may also be included. Vapour stream **S_{AB}** <107A> and vapour stream **S_{BB}** <107B> are supplied to the rectification column **RD_A** <300> in mixed form as vapour stream <107C>.

6. Examples

Example 1 (non-inventive):

A stream of aqueous NaOH (50% by weight) of 2 kg/h is supplied to the top of a reaction column at 30°C. A vaporous methanol stream of 21 kg/h is supplied in countercurrent above the bottom of the reaction column. The reaction column is operated at a pressure of 1.2 mbar. At the bottom of the column a virtually water-free product stream of 4.5 kg/h is withdrawn (30% by weight sodium methoxide in methanol). At the evaporator of the reaction column about 0.5 kW of heating power is introduced using low pressure steam. A vaporous methanol-water stream of 18.5 kg/h is withdrawn at the top of the reaction column and supplied to a rectification column. The rectification column is operated at about 1.1 bar. At the bottom of the rectification column a liquid water stream of 1.5 kg/h is discharged. At the top of the rectification column a vaporous methanol stream of 33.4 kg/h is withdrawn, preheated to 75°C in a heat exchanger and then supplied to a first compressor. In this compressor the stream is compressed to 1.7 bar. The stream is subsequently divided and a stream of 21 kg/h is recycled to the reaction column. The remainder of 12.4 kg/h is supplied to a two-stage compression with intermediate cooling. Compressor 2 compresses the stream to 4.9 bar and 180°C. In the subsequent intermediate cooling the stream is cooled to about 150°C and about 0.2 kW of heat is removed via cooling water. Compressor 3 finally compresses the stream to 6.2 bar and 170°C. In the subsequent condenser which is simultaneously the evaporator for the rectification column about 4 kW of heating power is provided for the rectification column. 3.9 kg/h of fresh methanol is supplied to the liquid methanol stream and the mixed stream is applied to the top of the rectification column as reflux.

Example 2 (inventive), corresponds to figure 1:

Identical to example 1 with the exception that the reaction column <100> comprises two bottoms evaporators <105> and <106>. In the first bottoms evaporator <105> a heat transfer medium is used to introduce a heat flow of about 0.2 kW which is removed and transferred to the heat transfer medium (water) in the intermediate cooling between compressor 2 and 3. The second bottoms

evaporator provides the remainder of the required energy via low pressure steam. This reduces the demand for low pressure steam for the reaction column <100> by about 40% compared to the example 1.

5 Example 3 (inventive), corresponds to figure 2:

A first reaction column is operated identically to example 2. In addition a second reaction column ("K2") is operated with aqueous KOH (50% by weight). As in example 2 both reaction columns each have two bottoms evaporators. A stream of 0.5 kg/h is supplied to the top of K2 at 30°C. A
 10 vaporous methanol stream of 7.5 kg/h is supplied in countercurrent above the bottom of K2. K2 is operated at a pressure of 1.2 bar. At the bottom of K2 a virtually water-free product stream of 1.5 kg/h is withdrawn (32% by weight potassium methoxide in methanol). In both evaporators of K2 altogether about 0.2 kW of heating power is introduced. A vaporous methanol-water stream of 7
 15 kg/h is withdrawn at the top of K2. This methanol-water stream is combined with the methanol-water stream from the first reaction column and supplied to the rectification column. The rectification column is operated at about 1.1 bar. At the bottom of the rectification column a liquid water stream of 1.8 kg/h is discharged. At the top of the rectification column a vaporous methanol stream of 46.2 kg/h is withdrawn, preheated to 75°C in a heat exchanger and then supplied to a first compressor. In this compressor the stream is compressed to 1.7 bar. The stream is
 20 subsequently divided and a stream of 28.5 kg/h is recycled to the reaction columns. The remainder of 17.7 kg/h is supplied to a two-stage compression with intermediate cooling. Compressor 2 compresses the stream to 4.9 bar and 180°C. In the subsequent intermediate cooling the stream is cooled to about 140°C and about 0.36 kW of heat is removed via water as heat transfer medium. Compressor 3 finally compresses the stream to 6.2 bar and 160°C. In the subsequent condenser
 25 which is simultaneously the evaporator for the rectification column <300> about 5 kW of heating power is provided for the rectification column. 4.7 kg/h of fresh methanol is supplied to the liquid methanol stream and the mixed stream is applied to the top of the rectification column as reflux. The heat transfer medium heated in the compressor intermediate cooling is utilized to introduce energy via the evaporators of the two reaction columns. In this way about 51% of the required
 30 heating power can be provided via the intermediate cooling. Only the remaining 49% must be provided via the evaporators using low pressure steam.

Result: The present invention allows for efficient use of the energy which would otherwise dissipate without being utilized in the intermediate cooling of the compressor stages.

Claims

1. Process for producing at least one alkali metal alkoxide of formula M_AOR , wherein R is a C_1 to C_6 hydrocarbon radical and wherein M_A is a metal selected from sodium, potassium, wherein:
 - (a1) a reactant stream S_{AE1} comprising ROH is reacted with a reactant stream S_{AE2} comprising M_AOH in countercurrent in a reactive rectification column RR_A to afford a crude product RP_A comprising M_AOR , water, ROH, M_AOH ,
 - wherein a bottoms product stream S_{AP} comprising ROH and M_AOR is withdrawn at the lower end of RR_A and a vapour stream S_{AB} comprising water and ROH is withdrawn at the upper end of RR_A ,
 - (a2) and optionally, simultaneously with and spatially separate from step (a1), a reactant stream S_{BE1} comprising ROH is reacted with a reactant stream S_{BE2} comprising M_BOH in countercurrent in a reactive rectification column RR_B to afford a crude product RP_B comprising M_BOR , water, ROH, M_BOH , wherein M_B is a metal selected from sodium, potassium,
 - wherein a bottoms product stream S_{BP} comprising ROH and M_BOR is withdrawn at the lower end of RR_B and a vapour stream S_{BB} comprising water and ROH is withdrawn at the upper end of RR_B ,
 - (b) the vapour stream S_{AB} and, when step (a2) is performed, the vapour stream S_{BB} , in admixture with S_{AB} or separately from S_{AB} , is passed into a rectification column RD_A and in RD_A is separated into an ROH-comprising vapour stream S_{B2} having a pressure p_{B2} and a temperature T_{B2} at the top of RD_A and a water stream S_W at the bottom of RD_A ,
 - (c) at least a portion of the vapour stream S_{B2} is compressed to obtain a vapour stream S_{B3} compressed with respect to S_{B2} having a pressure $p_{B3} > p_{B2}$ and a temperature $T_{B3} > T_{B2}$,
 - (d) energy from S_{B3} is transferred to at least one of RP_A , S_{AE1} , S_{AE2} , S_{AP} , S_{AB} and, when step (a2) is performed, alternatively or additionally, transferred to at least one of RP_B , S_{BE1} , S_{BE2} , S_{BP} , S_{BB} ,
 - to obtain a vapour stream S_{B4} having a lower energy content than S_{B3} .
2. Process according to Claim 1, wherein R is methyl or ethyl.
3. Process according to Claim 1 or 2, wherein S_{AE2} comprises not only M_AOH but also at least one further compound selected from water, ROH and wherein when step (a2) is performed S_{BE2} comprises not only M_BOH but also at least one further compound selected from water, ROH.

4. Process according to any of Claims 1 to 3, wherein the rectification column **RD_A**, the reaction column **RR_A** and, when step (a2) is performed, the reaction column **RR_B** are accommodated in one column shell, wherein the column is at least partially subdivided by at least one dividing wall and, when step (a2) is performed, by at least two dividing walls, wherein the at least one dividing wall or the at least two dividing walls extend to the bottom of the column.
5. Process according to any of Claims 1 to 4, wherein 10% to 90% by weight of the vapour stream **S_{B2}** is employed as reactant stream **S_{AE1}** and, when step (a2) is performed, alternatively or additionally as reactant stream **S_{BE1}**.
6. Process according to any of Claims 1 to 5, wherein in step (d) **S_{B3}** is used to heat least one of **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}** and, when step (a2) is performed, alternatively or additionally, **S_{B3}** is used to heat at least one of **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}**, **S_{BB}**.
7. Process according to any of Claims 1 to 6, wherein **RR_A** comprises at least one evaporator and wherein, when step (a2) is performed, **RR_B** comprises at least one evaporator.
8. Process according to Claim 7, wherein **RR_A** comprises at least one bottoms evaporator **V_{SA}** and wherein, when step (a2) is performed, **RR_B** comprises at least one bottoms evaporator **V_{SB}**.
9. Process according to Claim 8, wherein **S_{B3}** is at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator **V_{SA}** on the reaction column **RR_A** and **S_{AP}** is at least partially passed through **V_{SA}** so that energy is transferred from **S_{B3}** to **S_{AP}** and, when step (a2) is performed, alternatively or in addition, **S_{B3}** is at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator **V_{SB}** on the reaction column **RR_B** and **S_{BP}** is at least partially passed through **V_{SB}**, so that energy is transferred from **S_{B3}** to **S_{BP}**.
10. Process according to Claim 8, wherein **S_{B3}** contacts a heat transfer medium **W₁** distinct from **RP_A**, **S_{AE1}**, **S_{AE2}**, **S_{AP}**, **S_{AB}**, **RP_B**, **S_{BE1}**, **S_{BE2}**, **S_{BP}** or **S_{BB}** so that energy is transferred from **S_{B3}** to the at least one heat transfer medium **W₁** and **W₁** is then at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator **V_{SA}** on the reaction column **RR_A** and **S_{AP}** is at least partially passed through **V_{SA}** to transfer energy from **W₁** to **S_{AP}** and, when step (a2) is performed, alternatively or in addition, preferably in addition, **W₁** is then at least partially passed through a bottoms evaporator **V_{SB}** on the reaction column **RR_B** and **S_{BP}** is at least partially passed through **V_{SB}** to transfer energy from **W₁** to **S_{BP}**.
11. Process according to Claim 10, wherein **W₁** is water.
12. Process according to any of Claims 1 to 11, wherein the vapour stream **S_{B4}** is used for heating the rectification column **RD_A** and/or recycled into said column in a step (e).

13. Process according to any of Claims 1 to 12, wherein said process is performed continuously.