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**Cleaning of plant parts**

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The present invention relates to a method for cleaning plant parts which are used for the preparation or processing of (meth)acrylic esters.

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(Meth)acrylic esters are produced on a large industrial scale generally by esterifying (meth)acrylic acid with alkanols in the presence of strong acids and, if required, an entraining agent for removing the water of the esterification. The synthesis is preferably carried out in stirred reactors with attached distillation columns, and the working-up with the aid of a plurality of distillation columns and extraction apparatuses (cf. Kirk Othmer, Encyclopedia of Chemical Technology, 4th Ed., Vol. 1, pages 301-302). Heat is supplied and cooling effected usually by means of heat exchangers, such as plate-type, tube-bundle or spiral heat exchangers or circulation evaporators. The distillation columns are provided with baffles, such as sieve trays, bubble caps, dualflow trays or stacked packings or contain packing.

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One problem in the preparation of (meth)acrylic esters is the considerable tendency of the (meth)acrylic compounds to undergo free radical polymerization, especially under the action of heat or light. Especially in the esterification, reaction temperatures from 80 to 140°C are generally necessary in order to achieve economical esterification rates. In the purification, the necessary separation of the low-boilers and high-boilers by distillation and the isolation of the target ester require temperatures of from 60 to 150°C. Thus, the esters are exposed to terminal loads which can easily trigger an undesired polymerization. Soiling of the preparation apparatus and of the distillation columns and blockage of the lines, pumps, evaporators (fouling) and condensers by polymers are generally the result.

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Particularly with the use of crude acrylic acid, which is preferred for economic reasons and also contains various carbonyl compounds, such as formaldehyde, acetaldehyde, furfurals, benzaldehyde, protoanemonin and dicarboxylic acids, such as maleic acid or itaconic acid, soiling and blockage of plant parts occur to an increasing extent.

In order to prevent the undesired free radical polymerization, inhibitors are added to the reaction mixture.

However, complete elimination of polymer formation therewith is not achievable. After an operating term of several weeks, it is therefore usually necessary to free plant parts from polymer.

Another complicating factor is that relatively high molecular weight compounds, as formed by repeated Michael addition reactions of the (meth)acrylic acid with the (meth)acrylate, increase the viscosity of the reaction mixture and facilitate the position of polymer in plant parts.

The cleaning of the plants, for example by treatment with solvents or by manual removal of the polymer, is a complicated, expensive process causing environmental pollution. The plant parts are usually cleaned by treatment with suitable organic solvents, for example dimethylformamide, dibutylformamide, dimethylacetamide, dibutylacetamide, sulfolane or N-methylpyrrolidone. The solutions obtained have to be disposed of by a complicated procedure. In addition, manual removal of the polymer, for example from distillation trays or from evaporator pipes, may be necessary.

In addition to the environmental pollution as a result of the cleaning, the polymer formation and the cleaning of the plant parts always also result in a loss of desired products, since residual amounts of starting materials and desired esters remain in the plant after emptying. Moreover, the availability of the production plant is reduced as a result of the necessary shutdown.

For economic and ecological reasons, cleaning of the plant by a different method and substantial avoidance of losses of desired products should therefore be strived for.

- 5 It is an object of the present invention to provide a method for cleaning plant parts which are used for the preparation or processing of (meth)acrylic esters, which method avoids the above disadvantages.

We have found that this object is achieved in a novel method by

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- (a) emptying the plant parts,
- (b) flushing the plant parts with aqueous 5 to 50% strength by weight alkali metal hydroxide solution,
- (c) removing the alkali metal hydroxide solution from the plant parts,
- 15 (d) if required, washing the plant parts with water and
- (e) if required, drying the plant parts.

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Before the washing with alkali metal hydroxide solution, the plant parts are emptied as completely as possible so that only very small amounts of reaction mixture or of substance present in the plant part remain behind.

The concentration of the alkali metal hydroxide solution used is preferably from 10 to 30% by weight, based on the weight of the prepared solution.

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- Preferably, the temperature of the alkali metal hydroxide solution during flushing is from 20 to 140°C, particularly preferably from 60 to 100°C. It should be ensured that the alkali metal hydroxide solution is at this temperature during contact with the polymers deposited in the plant parts. If the entire plant is heated to the corresponding temperature, the temperature of the alkali metal hydroxide solution used corresponds to this desired temperature. If plant parts are not heated to this
- 30 temperature, the temperature of the alkali metal hydroxide solution used should be adjusted so that the stated temperature prevails in the areas with the polymer coating.

If necessary, the temperature of the alkali metal hydroxide solution is chosen correspondingly higher during introduction into the plant.

5 Sodium hydroxide is preferably used as the alkali metal hydroxide. The alkali metal hydroxide solution can be circulated through the corresponding plant parts in order to achieve a sufficiently long treatment time. The treatment time is usually from 1 to 24 hours, depending on the level of deposits in the plant parts. The treatment time, the concentration of the alkali metal hydroxide solution and the temperature depend on the type of (meth)acrylic ester used in the plant part and on the type and amount of  
10 the polymer. Usually, (meth)acrylic esters of alcohols, such as alkanols of 1 to 12, preferably 1 to 8 carbon atoms, are prepared by direct esterification or transesterification. Examples of alkanols are methanol, ethanol, n-butanol, 2-ethylhexanol and dimethylaminoethanol.

15 The (meth)acrylic esters can also be obtained by reacting olefins, preferably isobutene, with (meth)acrylic acid.

The plant parts to be cleaned are those plant parts which come into contact with the starting materials or products during the preparation or processing of (meth)acrylic  
20 esters, in particular during the esterification of (meth)acrylic acid with alkanols. The plant parts may be, for example, reactors, distillation columns, extraction apparatuses, heat exchangers, evaporators, condensers, pipes or pumps, which may be connected to form a unit. Preferably, the connected plant parts comprise a distillation unit which has a flushing line between the evaporator and the top of the  
25 columns. In particular, polymers formed in the preparation and processing of (meth)acrylic esters are deposited in these plant parts. The treatment with the alkali metal hydroxide solution causes or at least partly, hydrolysis of the ester groups of the (meth)acrylate polymers, resulting in liberation of the alkanol component. Inter alia, the polymer is detached from the plant parts as a result of this and goes  
30 completely or partly into solution and can thus be discharged with the alkali metal hydroxide solution from the plant parts.

To ensure that distillation apparatuses can be readily cleaned with the alkali metal hydroxide solution, they are preferably equipped with their own flushing lines. These permit the transport of the alkali metal hydroxide solution, which is heated, for example, in the evaporator of the column, to the top of the column. The flushing lines enable the top of the column and all column trays to be treated with the alkali metal hydroxide solution.

Preferably, after removal with the alkali metal hydroxide solution from the plant parts in step (c), the alcohols, in particular alkanols, formed during the cleaning are separated off from the alkali metal hydroxide solution in which they are present by phase separation, distillation or stripping. If its water solubility is low, the resulting alkanol forms a second phase which can readily be separated from the alkali metal hydroxide solution. If it is a water-soluble alkanol, it is preferably separated off by distillation or by stripping with a stripping gas, such as air or steam. The distillative separation and the stripping can be carried out, for example, in a heatable stirred reactor with an attached column. The energy may be supplied in a known manner, for example by double-walled heaters, coiled tubes or circulation heaters. The alkanol can be stripped in a stripping column in a known manner. For example, the preferably hot alkali metal hydroxide solution can be fed in at the top of the column after the flushing and can be stripped with air or steam by the countercurrent method. The condensation of the distillate or of the alkanol from the stripping gas can be effected by means of known cooling apparatuses, such as tube-bundle or plate-type heat exchangers.

The stripping is preferably carried out in the stripping unit, which is present as a rule in every plant for the production of (meth)acrylic esters and in which customarily occurring alkanol-containing waste waters are stripped. The alcohol, in particular alkanol, can be recycled directly to the esterification reaction after being separated off.

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Since, as a rule, only a part of the alkali metal hydroxide solution used is consumed during the cleaning, the alkali metal hydroxide solution can be collected after the

cleaning and used several times for cleaning. However, the concentration of alkali metal hydroxide should preferably not fall below 5% by weight, in order to avoid a deterioration in the cleaning performance.

- 5     The novel process can be carried out easily and rapidly, with the result that the plant availability is increased.

Moreover, desired products, particularly alkanols, can be recovered.

- 10    The example which follows illustrates the invention.

### **Example**

#### **Cleaning of a distillation column:**

- 15    The distillation column used was a dualflow column for the distillation of reaction mixtures obtained in the esterification of (meth)acrylic acid with alkanols. After indication of soiling of the column trays for the distillation column, detectable by the increase in the pressure difference between the bottom of the column and the top of the column, the distillation process was stopped and the distillation unit emptied. The  
20    corresponding evaporator was then filled with 20% strength by weight aqueous NaOH solution. The NaOH solution was heated to 80°C and applied to the top column tray via a flushing line. After a treatment time of 5 hours with this hot solution at a circulation rate of about 10 m<sup>3</sup>/h, said solution was pumped into a storage container and the distillation unit was flushed with water and, if necessary,  
25    dried with air.

After the distillation column had been put into operation again, the pressure difference was normal again.

- 30    **Recovery of the alkanol:**

A flushing solution which was obtained during the cleaning of a plant for the production of butyl acrylate and contained about 7% by weight of NaOH and about

5% by weight of butanol was fed at 60°C to the top of a stripping column which had 30 dualflow trays and was stripped with steam by the countercurrent method (0.2 t/m<sup>3</sup>). The resulting condensate separated into two phases, the aqueous phase being fed to the top of the column again. The organic phase, the butanol, was fed directly to the esterification. About 90% of the butanol were recovered.

We claim:

1. A method for cleaning plant parts which are used for the production or processing of (meth)acrylic esters, by
  - (a) emptying the plant parts,
  - (b) flushing the plant parts with aqueous 5 to 50% strength by weight alkali metal hydroxide solution,
  - (c) removing the alkali metal hydroxide solution from the plant parts,
  - (d) if required, washing the plant parts with water and
  - (e) if required, drying the plant parts.
2. A method as claimed in claim 1, wherein the temperature of the alkali metal hydroxide solution during flushing is from 20 to 140°C.
3. A method as claimed in claim 1 or 2, wherein the plant parts are reactors, distillation columns, extraction apparatuses, heat exchangers, evaporators, condensers, pipes or pumps, which may be connected to form a unit.
4. A method as claimed in claim 3, wherein the unit comprising the connected plant parts is a distillation unit which has a flushing line between the evaporator and the top of the columns.
5. A method as claimed in claims 1 to 4, wherein the plant parts are used in the production of (meth)acrylic esters by reaction of (meth)acrylic acid with alcohols or olefins or by reacting (meth)acrylic esters with alcohols.
6. A method as claimed in any of claims 1 to 5, wherein the plant parts are cleaned to remove deposited polymers formed in the production or processing of (meth)acrylic esters.
7. A method as claimed in claim 6, wherein alcohols contained in the alkali



metal hydroxide solution after step (c) are separated from said solution by phase separation, distillation or stripping and, if required, recycled to the esterification for the production of (meth)acrylic esters.

- 5      8.      A method as claimed in any of claims 1 to 7, wherein the alkali metal hydroxide solution is collected after the cleaning and used several times for cleaning.
- 10      9.      The use of alkali metal hydroxides for cleaning plant parts which serve for the production or processing of (meth)acrylic esters.

