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Magnetic tunnel structures: Transport properties controlled by bias, magnetic field, and microwave and optical radiation

N.V. Volkov [a,b,c,*], E.V. Eremin [a,b], A.S. Tarasov [a,b], M.V. Rautskii [a], S.N. Varnakov [a,b], S.G. Ovchinnikov [a,c], G.S. Patrin [a,c]

[a] Kirensky Institute of Physics, Russian Academy of Sciences, Siberian Branch, Krasnoyarsk 660036, Russia
[b] Siberian State Aerospace University, Krasnoyarsk 660014, Russia
[c] Siberian Federal University, Krasnoyarsk 660041, Russia

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ABSTRACT

Different phenomena that give rise to a spin-polarized current in some systems with magnetic tunnel junctions are considered. In a manganite-based magnetic tunnel structure in CIP geometry, the effect of current-channel switching was observed, which causes bias-driven magnetoresistance, rf rectification, and the photoelectric effect. The second system under study, ferromagnetic/insulator/semiconductor, exhibits the features of the transport properties in CIP geometry that are also related to the current-channel switching effect. The described properties can be controlled by a bias, a magnetic field, and optical radiation. At last, the third system under consideration is a cooperative assembly of magnetic tunnel junctions. This system exhibits tunnel magnetoresistance and the magnetic-field-driven microwave detection effect.

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1. Introduction

Recent studies have shown that a spin degree of freedom of charge carriers manifests itself most strikingly and sometimes unexpectedly in nano-sized magnetic and hybrid structures [1,2]. Spin transport and manipulation by spins in nanostructures have formed a novel trend in physics of condensed matter, known currently as spintronics. This field of investigations involves both fundamental physics of spin-dependent phenomena and applications based on controlling an electron spin.

Among the most attractive spin-dependent phenomena in the magnetic nanostructures is the spin dynamics induced by a spin-polarized current. This phenomenon is related to a so-called spin transfer torque effect through which electron spins may influence orientation of magnetization, causing reversal of the latter or stable high-frequency precession [3]. This precession serves as a source of microwaves whose frequency can be controlled by a current and a magnetic field.

The spin transfer torque is responsible also for the inverse effect, i.e., generation of a dc voltage on a magnetic tunnel junction under the action of microwaves [4]. This rectification effect, which can be successfully driven by a magnetic field and a current, originates from the interplay between the spin-polarized current and the spin dynamics in magnetic nanostructures. Thus, magnetic tunnel and hybrid structures exhibit a variety of the spin-dependent physical phenomena. In this study, we consider some spin-dependent phenomena in the magnetic tunnel structures of different types. From our point of view, these phenomena, still insufficiently presented in the literature, have a considerable potential for application. First of all, it concerns a specific response of the magnetic tunnel structures to the effect of microwave and optical radiation. The transport properties of the tunnel structures were studied using unconventional current-in-plane (CIP) geometry, which was suggested, first, by D. Worledge and P.L. Trouilloud [5]. We also discuss the spin-dependent phenomena in a cooperative system of the magnetic tunnel junctions.

2. Magnetic tunnel structures in current-in-plane geometry

The first system to consider is the manganite-based magnetic tunnel structure $La_{0.7}Sr_{0.3}MnO_3$ (100 nm)/manganite depleted layer (5 nm)/MnSi (10 nm) in unconventional CIP geometry [6]. Here, the depleted layer is an insulator; therefore, it forms a potential barrier between the $La_{0.7}Sr_{0.3}MnO_3$ (LSMO) ferromagnetic electrodes with T_C=250 K and MnSi with T_C=30 K. Fig. 1a demonstrates the geometry used in measurements. An equivalent electrical scheme of the structure for the CIP geometry is shown in Fig. 1b.

* Corresponding author at: Kirensky Institute of Physics, Russian Academy of Sciences, Siberian Branch, Krasnoyarsk 660036, Russia. Tel.: +7 391 290 7525; fax: +7 391 243 89 23.
E-mail address: volk@iph.krasn.ru (N.V. Volkov).

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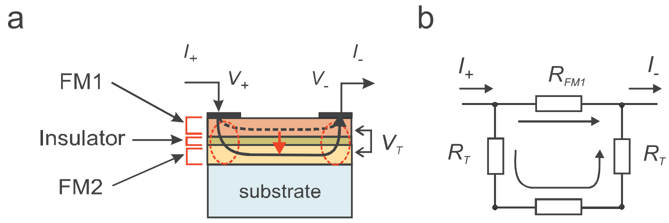

Fig. 1. (a) Magnetic tunnel junction in CIP geometry; FM1 and FM2 are the ferromagnetic LSMO and MnSi layers and an insulator is the depleted manganite layer; the arrows indicate current channels. (b) Equivalent electrical scheme.

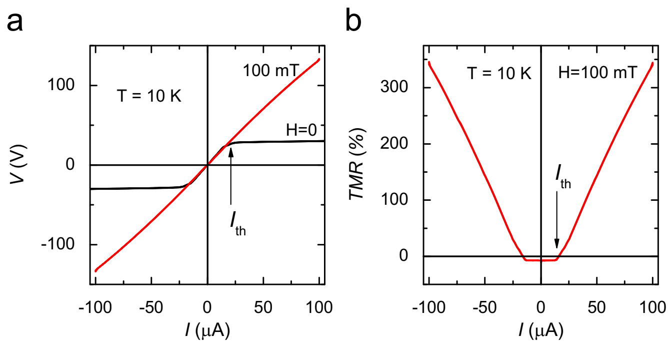

Fig. 2. (a) V–I curves for $H=0$ and for an applied magnetic field of 100 mT at $T=10$ K. (b) Dependence of the magnetoresistance (TMR) on bias current I through the structure.

The top and bottom conducting layers in the structure are separated by a potential barrier preventing current passage in the bottom layer. When I applied to the structure is small, the current flows mainly in the top layer, i.e., in the manganite film (initial linear portion of the V–I characteristic). An increase in I leads to the occurrence of bias voltage V_T on the tunnel junctions under the current contacts and, consequently, a decrease in junction resistance R_T. At a certain value of current I_{th}, R_T becomes lower than resistance R_{FM1} of the top layer, so the current starts flowing mainly in the bottom layer, whose resistance R_{FM2} is small as compared to R_{FM1} ($R_{FM2} \ll R_{FM1}$). One should expect a sharp change in the V–I characteristic of the structure.

The described scenario was observed in full in the structure under study [6]. The V–I characteristics of the structure have the initial, almost linear portion corresponding to the case when the current flows mainly through the top layer of the structure. At some threshold current I_{th}, the slope of the dependences sharply changes (Fig. 2, dependence for $H=0$). This is caused by current channel switching between the layers of the structure (at $I > I_{th}$, the current flows mainly through the bottom layer with higher conductivity).

Approximation of the V–I characteristics in accordance with the equivalent scheme (Fig. 1b) yields satisfactory results [7]. For tunnel current I_T the Simmons formula was used [8] and the current through the upper layer was described according to the Ohm's law.

The measurements of the V–I characteristics showed that the effect of the magnetic field is more pronounced at $T < 30$ K and for $I > I_{th}$ (Fig. 2a). At $T=10$ K in a magnetic field of 100 mT, the V–I characteristic, initially strongly nonlinear, becomes nearly linear. This is due to an increase in R_T at parallel orientation of magnetizations M_M and M_S of the ferromagnetic layers LSMO and MnSi, respectively, in a magnetic field; R_T becomes higher than R_{FM1}, the current channels switch, and the current starts flowing mainly in the top layer, even at $I > I_{th}$. This scenario causes the tunnel magnetoresistance ($TMR=(R(H)-R(0))/R(0)$) effect whose value depends on a bias current applied to the structure (Fig. 2b).

Considering the dependence of I_T on relative orientation of M_M and M_S, we should suggest that, in our case, the ferromagnets are of different types: LSMO is a MASC (majority spin carriers) ferromagnet, where spins of the carriers are mainly parallel to the direction of magnetization. MnSi should be attributed to a MISC (minority spin carriers) type, where spins are mainly antiparallel to magnetization, which is confirmed by the DOS calculation [9]. Only for a tunnel junction with one MISC and one MASC ferromagnetic electrode, R_T will be higher at parallel orientation of the electrodes (in a magnetic field) than at the antiparallel one (magnetic field is zero), i.e., the magnetoresistance is positive ($TMR > 0$) [10].

Now let us consider the effect of microwave radiation on the transport properties of the magnetic tunnel structure under study. As before, we used planar geometry when a current flows parallel to the interfaces. During the measurements, the structure was placed inside a microwave cavity (TE_{102} mode, $f=10$ GHz) in a nodal position of the maximum rf magnetic field. The rf magnetic field h_{ac} was maintained along the structure plane; static in-plane magnetic field H was also applied perpendicular to h_{ac}. At such a configuration, the microwave magnetic field induces microwave current I_{ac} in the tunnel structure.

The structure exhibits the effect of rectification of I_{ac}, but at $T < 30$ K the value of detected voltage V_{dc} depends on H (Fig. 3a). Bias current I_{dc} through the structure strongly affects V_{dc} and its behavior in a magnetic field. The maximum value of V_{dc} corresponds to I_{dc}, for which the maximal nonlinearity is observed in the V–I characteristics (Fig. 3b). Upon detuning of the I_{dc} in the regions where the V–I characteristics are more smooth, V_{dc} decreases and at zero bias no rectification effect is observed. It is apparently nonlinearity of the V–I characteristics that determines the detection properties of the structure under study. The magnetic-field dependence of the effect appears due to modification of the V–I characteristics in the applied magnetic field. Thus, we believe that, in our case, the same mechanism as in the case of classical (nonmagnetic) tunnel junctions works. At the same time, we should note that it is the magnetic-field dependence of the resistance of the magnetic tunnel transitions that is the origin of the change in the V–I characteristics (as was discussed above).

Electromagnetic radiation in the optical range also affects the transport properties of the investigated structure in the CIP geometry [11]. The photoinduced changes in the transport properties are reversible and tend to saturation with increasing radiation power density P (Fig. 4). This suggests that the observed changes are not related to trivial heating due to radiation absorption. This suggestion is confirmed by a measured spectral dependence of the photoelectric effect. The spectral dependence has a threshold character, as the photoinduced changes are observed at the photon energies $(h\nu)_{th} > 1.17$ eV.

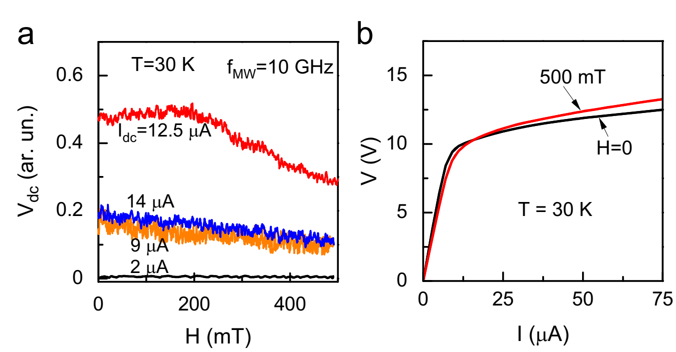

Fig. 3. (a) Detected dc voltage V_{dc} as a function of the magnetic field measured for different bias current at $T=30$ K. (b) V–I characteristic for $H=0$ and in a field of 500 mT at $T=30$ K.

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