From stochastic single atomic switch to nanoscale resistive memory device

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We study the switching characteristics of nanoscale junctions created between a tungsten tip and a silver film covered by a thin ionic conductor layer. Atomic-sized junctions show spectacular current induced switching characteristics, but both the magnitude of the switching voltage and the direction of the switching vary randomly for different junctions. In contrast, somewhat larger junctions with diameters of a few nanometers display a well defined, reproducible switching behavior attributed to the formation and destruction of nanoscale channels in the ionic conductor surface layer. Our results define a lower size limit of 3 nm for reliable ionic nano-switches, which is well below the resolution of recent lithographic techniques.

Solid state ionic conductors are good candidates for the next generation of nonvolatile computer memory elements. Such devices have to show reproducible resistance switching at reasonable voltage and current values even if scaled down to the nanometer sizes. Solid state memory blocks based on resistive switching have already proven to operate down to the lateral resolution of 100 nm − 1 µm (Refs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5). A further decrease of the size, down to the ultimate limit of the single atomic diameter, raises many technical challenges including reproducibility, which is a basic requirement for mass-scale production. In such atomic-scale devices the possible junction configurations are determined by the atomic granularity of matter and the fine details of interatomic interactions. The transport through these nanostructures with dimensions comparable to the Fermi wavelength is governed by the quantum nature of conduction: the current is carried along discrete conductance channels. The conductance of a junction is described by the Landauer formula,

\[ G = G_0 \sum_i \tau_i, \]

where \( G_0 = 2e^2/h \approx (12.9 \, \text{kΩ})^{-1} \) being multiplied by the sum of the channel transmission probabilities determined by the details of the junction geometry and the electronic structure of the material.

In this work we study the resistive switching phenomenon on variable size nanoscale junctions with diameters below a few tens of nanometers. Variable size point contacts were created by gently touching an Ag thin film sample with an electrochemically sharpened W tip. To enhance the stability of the system, the junctions were created and the measurements were performed at liquid He temperature. More details on the experimental techniques are given in the supplementary material.

In order to statistically characterize the junctions over a broad scale of diameters we acquired \( \approx 10^4 \) I-V curves by creating contacts with different conductance values \( (1 \, G_0 \sim 400 \, G_0) \). The diameters of the junctions, estimated by the Sharvin expression, vary from single atom size to \( \approx 10 \) nm.

In this regime the I-V curves regularly exhibit a clear reversible switching behavior in the voltage range of 0.1−1 V (more than 60% of the junctions have shown jumps with relative amplitudes above 10%). Figure 1 shows typical I-V characteristics for contacts of various conductances. Both the current and voltage values seem to be surprisingly high for a device with dimensions of a few nanometers. The corresponding current densities exceed \( 10^9 \, \text{A/cm}^2 \). Note, however, that in this mesoscopic transport regime the contacts are not destroyed by the Joule heat, as the dissipation occurs inside a much larger volume determined by the inelastic scattering length.

A careful comparison of the curves shown in Fig. 1 reveals significant differences between the characteristics of the junctions with typical on-state conductance of \( G_{ON} = 50 - 300 \, G_0 \) (panels on the left) and that of the smaller contacts with on-state conductance below

FIG. 1. Resistive switching phenomena for various selected point contacts with different conductance values. The corresponding on- and off-state conductance values measured at \( V = 0.1 \) V are shown on each graph, respectively. The voltage bias is regarded as positive (negative) if the Ag sample is positively (negatively) biased with respect to the W tip.
about $G_{ON} = 20G_0$ (panels on the right). Junctions in the first, higher conductance regime will be denoted as nanoscale junctions. For such contacts, the current steeply increases as soon as a critical voltage is exceeded. The conductance, however, does not saturate at a predefined value, it increases as long as the applied voltage is ramped up. In our system a serial resistance of $R_s = 90\,\Omega$ is present, which limits this process as the junction’s resistance becomes comparable to $R_s$. Note, that in this regime the circuit is not purely voltage driven, which accounts for the back-turning of the I-V curve in Fig. 1(a). We found, that in these nanoscale junctions the direction of the current-voltage loops is the same for all the curves.

In contrast, smaller junctions with $G_{ON} < 20G_0$ – denoted as atomic-sized contacts – exhibit a switching behavior between different well defined initial and final states. During the switching event the system jumps to a new state, corresponding to a new line in the I-V characteristics, and stays there both for increasing and decreasing voltage ramps (until a back-switching occurs for reversed voltage). The switching voltage, however, scatters in a broad range. Moreover, the direction of the loops is random.

The above features, presented on selected curves, are confirmed by statistical analysis of a large amount of junctions. In Fig. 2(a) the switching voltage values are shown in the form of a 2D colorscale plot. It is evident that for nanoscale junctions ($G_{ON} > 50G_0$) the switching voltage has a relatively well defined value at both polarities around 0.5 V, whereas for atomic-sized contacts ($G_{ON} < 20G_0$) the switching voltage scatters randomly in a broad voltage region. An even more obvious distinction is observed in the direction of the switching. This is represented by $+1 - 1$ value if the bias voltage of the sample is positive/negative with respect to the tip for the off $\rightarrow$ on transition. Averaging the direction of the switching for various junctions with similar conductance, one finds that the switching is always positive for $G_{ON} > 50G_0$, whereas for $G_{ON} < 20G_0$ the sign of the switching varies randomly (Fig. 2(c)). We argue that the two distinguished switching mechanisms are related to fundamentally different physical phenomena. First we discuss the reproducible resistive switching observed in highly conducting contacts, and later we return to the random switching observed at the atomic level.

The curves recorded for nanoscale junctions are very similar to those recently reported for resistive switches based on Ag-Ag$_2$S-Me sandwich structures, where Me is a transition metal and Ag$_2$S is an ionic conductor layer formed between the two electrodes. The operation of these devices is based on the electrochemical reaction $Ag^+ + e^- \rightarrow Ag^{(metal)}$ that is, the solubility of Ag$^+$ ions in the Ag$_2$S lattice allows migration controlled by the bias voltage applied. For asymmetric contacts, reversible metallic filaments are built up and destructed by applying a negative/positive voltage, respectively, which is reflected by abrupt changes in the device conductance. The ionic migration is an activated process, resulting in a threshold voltage bias. In our measurements the sign of the switching, the value of the threshold voltage and the overall shape of the curves are consistent with earlier experimental and theoretical reports on such ionic switches. We emphasize, however, that in our measurements no special treatment of the sample was performed, exposing the Ag layer to air for more than one week was enough to establish the ionic-type switching behavior. More details on sample characterization are provided in the supplementary material.
In order to demonstrate the universal and reproducible nature of this phenomenon we scaled the individual I-V curves – calculated with respect to the zero bias value of the conductance. The histogram is created for 130 independent I-V curves with $G_\text{ON} < 10 G_0$. The inset shows the histogram of the conductance versus electrode separation curves recorded during 5000 repeated opening and closing cycles at a constant bias voltage of 100 mV.

In case of the _atomic-sized contacts_ the qualitative observations, especially the random switching sign and the broad range of the threshold voltages, contradict the picture of ionic switching. In this regime we attribute the switching process to atomic rearrangements in the junction due to electromigration induced by the high current density. The relevance of single atomic displacements is demonstrated in Fig. 5 (a) and (b), where typical switching traces are presented as conductance-voltage curves. Since the conductance value of a single Ag atom corresponds to the conductance quantum, $1 G_0$ (Ref. 15), jumps of this magnitude indicate the inclusion or removal of a single atom in the junction area. Multiple steps are often observed with amplitudes close to the integer multiples of $G_0$ further supporting this scheme.

The role of the single atomic migration is also supported by the statistical analysis of a large number of switching characteristics. A histogram was made of the conductance traces detected during the voltage sweeps by subtracting the baseline conductance measured in a narrow window (50 mV) around zero bias. The result is shown in Fig. 5 (c). The well defined peak around $1 G_0$ reflects that relative jumps corresponding to single atom conductance are dominating. For comparison, the inset of Fig. 5 shows the traditional conductance histogram measured on the same sample by repeatedly indenting the tip to the surface and breaking the such created nano-
juncture at a constant bias voltage of 100 mV.

In a control experiment the above phenomenon was investigated in the same voltage and current ranges utilizing the mechanically controllable break junction technique (MCBJ), where the junction is created by the in situ breaking of a silver wire. The freshly broken surfaces created in cryogenic vacuum warrant the absence of ionic contamination in the junction. This method fully reproduced the main features of the switching characteristics observed for atomic scale contacts [Fig. 1 (d)–(f)], while those of larger junctions were not observed. Preliminary results obtained by the MCBJ technique on pure Au, Pt, Fe revealed that the current induced atomic switching is a quite general phenomenon in atomic-sized junctions.

In conclusion, we have identified two resistive switching mechanisms at the nanoscale. It was shown that the ionic conductor-based devices are good candidates for nonvolatile memory cells as they exhibit stable and reproducible switching behavior. It was demonstrated, that solely the exposure of an Ag thin layer to air is enough to establish an ionic conductor surface layer, which is sufficient to form a reliable switching device in a nanoscale point-contact geometry. Our results set lower limit for the size of such memory cells, below which the character of the switching process dramatically changes due to the enhanced single atomic migration. This size limit is estimated to be d ≈ 3 nm, resulting in storage densities above the capacity of current NAND Flash devices and comparable to the proposed bit size of magnetic media determined by the superparamagnetic limit.

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