Frequency splitting of intervalley phonons in graphene

K. Ziegler¹(a) and E. Kogan²

¹ Institut für Physik, Universität Augsburg - 86135 Augsburg, Germany, EU
² Department of Physics, Bar-Ilan University - Ramat Gan 52900, Israel

received 30 May 2011; accepted in final form 18 June 2011
published online 19 July 2011

PACS 63.22.Rc – Phonons in graphene
PACS 72.80.Vp – Electronic transport in graphene
PACS 72.10.Di – Scattering by phonons, magnons, and other nonlocalized excitations

Abstract – We study the thermal distribution of intervalley phonons in a graphene sheet. These phonons have two components with the same frequency. The degeneracy of the two modes is preserved by weak electron-phonon coupling. As a sufficiently strong electron-phonon coupling, however, can result in a splitting into an optical and an acoustic phonon branch, which creates a fluctuating gap in the electronic spectrum. We describe these effects by treating the phonon distribution within a saddle-point approximation. Fluctuations around the saddle point indicate a Berezinskii-Kosterlitz-Thouless transition of the acoustic branch. This transition might be observable in the polarization of Raman scattered light.

Graphene, a two-dimensional sheet of carbon atoms forming a honeycomb lattice, has highly unusual electronic properties [1–4]. This is due to the fact that there are two bands that touch each other at two Dirac nodes. Moreover, the low-energy quasiparticles of undoped graphene experience a linear dispersion around the Dirac nodes. Transport properties, characterized by the longitudinal conductivity at the Dirac nodes, are quite robust and do not vary much from sample to sample. Exactly at the Dirac point a minimal DC conductivity has been observed in a number of experiments [1–3]. Its value is not much affected by disorder [5,6]. A typical source of disorder in graphene are frozen lattice deformations (ripples) [7,8]. In a more realistic description, these deformations may not be frozen but fluctuate thermally due to the softness of the two-dimensional material.

In this paper we investigate effects of the electron-phonon interaction in graphene. Considering only in-plane displacements of graphene atoms, we have four different phonon modes. For low-energy electronic states electron-phonon interaction is efficient if the phonon wave vector is close to Γ, K or K’ points. As was explained by Basko and Aleiner [9], the only modes which are effectively coupled to electrons are the pseudovector optical phonons corresponding to the irreducible representation E₂ of the group C₆v from the Γ-point, and the scalar phonons corresponding to the irreducible representations A₁ and B₁ of the same group from the points K and K’.

Experimental information on the interaction is obtained by Raman spectroscopy [10–14] and by angle-resolved photoemission spectroscopy [15]. The above-mentioned theoretical analysis of the role of different phonons is confirmed by the fact that in the Raman spectrum of graphene only two two-phonon peaks are seen: the D* peak near 2ωA₁ = 2650 cm⁻¹ and the G* peak near 2ωE₂ = 3250 cm⁻¹, corresponding to scalar and pseudovector phonons, respectively. In our paper we will consider the interaction of electrons only with the scalar phonons.

The physics of the electron-phonon system is defined by the Hamiltonian with optical (Einstein) phonons at frequency ω₀ [16]:

\[ H = \sum_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'} \left[ \omega_0 b_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'}^\dagger b_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'} + [h_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'} + \alpha (b_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'} + b_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'}^\dagger)]c_{\mathbf{r}}^\dagger c_{\mathbf{r}} \right]. \]  \( (1) \)

Here \( c_{\mathbf{r}}^\dagger \) (\( c_{\mathbf{r}} \)) are the electron creation (annihilation) operators and \( b_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'}^\dagger \) (\( b_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'} \)) are the phonon creation (annihilation) operators. This Hamiltonian describes an effective attraction between the fermions and a renormalization of the electronic hopping amplitude \( h_{\mathbf{r},\mathbf{r}'} \), reducing the hopping rate substantially (polaron effect). The attractive interaction may lead to the formation of Cooper pairs. In 2D this effect is not relevant due to strong fluctuations, preventing the system to become superconducting.
The conventional approach to determine the properties of the phonons and the electrons is based on a self-consistent evaluation of the self-energy (Migdal approximation) [17,18]. The latter provides an effective (or renormalized) energy and its imaginary part an effective scattering rate. Such a static approximation might be insufficient in a two-dimensional system, since it does not take into account thermal fluctuations. This was already discussed in an experimental study of graphene [13]. To avoid this problem, we include thermal fluctuations in our approach. To this end, we replace the phonon operators \( b_{r,r'} \), \( b_{r,r'}^\dagger \) by their quantum average: \( \langle b_{r,r'} \rangle \equiv u_{r,r'} \) and \( \langle b_{r,r'}^\dagger \rangle \equiv v_{r,r'}^* \). In this approximation we can keep thermal fluctuations but ignore quantum fluctuations of the phonons. The electrons, on the other hand, are studied in full quantum dynamics. This reduces the grand-canonical ensemble at inverse temperature \( \beta \), defined by the generating function \( \text{Tr} e^{-\beta H} \), to a functional integral with respect to thermal density for the phonon field, and the static one-particle Green’s function can also be written as an average \( \langle \ldots \rangle_{\text{ph}} \) with respect to the distribution \( e^{-\beta S}/Z \) [21]:

\[
G_{r,r'} = \langle (1 + e^{-\beta h})^{-1} e^{-\beta S} D[\bar{u}] \rangle_{\text{ph}}.
\]

The distribution \( e^{-\beta S}/Z \) is invariant under a unitary transformation. For the special four-dimensional transformation

\[ h \rightarrow U h U^\dagger, \quad U = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & e^{i\varphi} \end{pmatrix}, \]

with \( 0 \leq \varphi < 2\pi \) the electron-phonon coupling term in eq. (3) satisfies the relation

\[ U \bar{u} \cdot \hat{\Pi} U^\dagger = O \bar{u} \cdot \hat{\Pi}, \]

where \( O \) is the orthogonal transformation \((i.e. \ rotation \ by \ angle \ \varphi)\) in the space of the matrices \( \Pi \):

\[ O = \cos \varphi \Pi_0 + i \sin \varphi \Pi_2 = \exp(i\varphi \Pi_2). \]

Since the gradient part of the Hamiltonian \( h \) is invariant under a global rotation of the phonon field \( \bar{u} \), the distribution \( e^{-\beta S}/Z \) is also invariant. As a consequence, the phonon field can produce spontaneously a dimerization \( \langle \bar{u} \rangle \neq 0 \) with massless fluctuations.

Second-order perturbation theory is the standard approach for evaluating the change of the phonon frequency by the electron-phonon interaction [7,22,23]. In our model, defined by the action (5), second order in \( \alpha \) gives us for the renormalized frequency of the intervalley mode,

\[
\alpha^2 \left. \frac{\partial^2 S}{\partial u_i \partial u_j} \right|_{u=0} = (\omega_0 - a_2)\delta_{ij}
\]

with

\[
a_2 = \frac{\alpha^2}{\pi \beta^2} \ln \left[ \frac{\cosh(\beta E_F) + \cosh(\beta \Lambda)}{1 + \cosh(\beta E_F)} \right],
\]

\[
\begin{pmatrix} 0 & u_r \\ u_r^* & 0 \end{pmatrix} = u_{1,r} \Pi_1 + u_{2,r} \Pi_2,
\]

where \( u_{1,r} = (u_r + u_r^*)/2 \) and \( u_{2,r} = (u_r - u_r^*)/2 \) [16].

The integral \( Z \) in eq. (2) serves as a generating function that allows us to get, for instance, the static electronic Green’s function by differentiation of \( \ln Z \) as

\[
G_{r,r'} = \frac{1}{Z} \int (1 + e^{-\beta h})^{-1} e^{-\beta S} D[\bar{u}] e^{\beta h}.
\]
where $\Lambda = 2\sqrt{\pi}$ is the momentum cutoff. For $\beta t \gg 1$, which is satisfied even at room temperature due to $t \approx 2.7 \, eV$, the renormalized phonon frequency has the asymptotic behavior

$$\omega_u \sim \omega_0 - \frac{\alpha^2}{t^2\pi} (2\sqrt{\pi}t - |E_F|).$$

Thus, the intervalley phonons are softened by the electronelectron-phonon coupling. Moreover, the phonons harden as we go away from the Dirac point $E_F = 0$, in agreement with recent experiments [13, 14, 24]. However, this frequency becomes negative if $\omega_0 < a_2$, indicating an instability of the electron-phonon system. In particular, the vanishing frequency reveals a phonon softening, where the optical phonon mode becomes acoustic. In the following we shall discuss that this instability is associated with a splitting of the degenerate phonon modes, where instead of a single phonon frequency two different frequencies appear.

The instability cannot be treated within second-order perturbation theory but requires a self-consistent approach. Here it is natural to perform the integration in eqs. (2) and (4) in a saddle-point (SP) approximation. This leads to the SP equation $\delta_{\alpha}S = 0$ which determines an average lattice dimerization $\bar{u}$. Assuming a uniform solution $\bar{u}$, the SP equation $\partial S/\partial u_i = 0$ reads

$$\bar{u} = 2\frac{\alpha^2}{\omega_0} \int \frac{1}{\epsilon_k \cosh(\beta E_F) + \cosh(\beta \epsilon_k)} \frac{d^2 k}{(2\pi)^2}$$

with the dispersion $\epsilon_k = \sqrt{\pi t^2 + \bar{u}^2}$ of the electrons. A non-zero $\bar{u}$ opens an electronic gap $\Delta = 2\bar{u}$. This equation fixes only $\bar{u}$, not the direction of the vector $\bar{u} \equiv (\bar{u} \cos \varphi, \bar{u} \sin \varphi)$. For a nontrivial solution $\bar{u} \neq 0$ we can perform the integration in eq. (11) and obtain the equation

$$\cosh(\beta E_F) + \cosh(\beta \sqrt{\pi t^2 + \bar{u}^2}) = e^{\beta \pi x_\omega/\alpha^2}. \quad (12)$$

Then the critical point $\beta$, of the instability is determined from this equation for $\bar{u} = 0$. For $\beta t \gg 1$ and $|E_F| < \bar{u}$ we get from eq. (12)

$$\bar{u} \sim 2\alpha^2 \frac{\omega_0^2}{\pi}(1 - \frac{\pi t^2 \omega_0^2}{4a^2})$$

and for $\beta t \gg 1$, $|E_F| > \bar{u}$

$$\bar{u} \sim \sqrt{\frac{\pi t^2 \omega_0}{\alpha^2} + |E_F|^2} - 4\pi t^2. \quad (14)$$

While an increase of the electron-phonon coupling $\alpha$ increases $\bar{u}$ for $|E_F| < \bar{u}$, it decreases $\bar{u}$ for $|E_F| > \bar{u}$. This result indicates that the instability of the $\bar{u} = 0$ solution is supported by the electron-phonon interaction near the Dirac point, whereas the instability is suppressed further away from the Dirac point.

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**Fig. 1:** (Colour on-line) Splitting of the phonon modes (from eqs. (17), (18)). The red (blue) curve represents $\omega_1 (\omega_2)$ in units of $\omega_0$, indicating that for the dimensionless electron-phonon coupling $\alpha/\sqrt{\pi t^0} > a_c \approx 0.94$ there exist two different frequencies.

For small $\bar{u}$ eq. (12) can be expanded. This allows us to study the properties of the phonon renormalization for nonzero $\bar{u}$, i.e. in the transition regime where $\bar{u} \sim 0$ and the perturbation theory is unstable. The SP equation then reads

$$\alpha^2 \frac{\partial S}{\partial u_j} |_{u = \bar{u}} \approx (\omega - a + a \alpha \bar{u}^2) u_j = 0. \quad (15)$$

Besides the trivial solution $\bar{u} = 0$ this equation has the nonzero solutions

$$\bar{u} = \pm \sqrt{a_2 - \omega_0 / \sqrt{a_4}} \quad (a_2 - \omega_0 \geq 0).$$

The stability matrix is

$$\alpha^2 \frac{\partial^2 S}{\partial u_i \partial u_j} |_{u = \bar{u}} = 4(\omega - \omega_0) \frac{\bar{u}_i \bar{u}_j}{\bar{u}^2}. \quad (16)$$

instead of (9). Since the SP solution $\bar{u} = 0$ is on a circle with radius $\bar{u}$, the eigenvalues of the matrix on the right-hand side are $\omega_1 = 4(a_2 - \omega_0)$ and $\omega_2 = 0$. For a stable solution with $\bar{u} = 0$, on the other hand, the stability matrix agrees with the result of the second-order perturbation theory of eq. (9). Combining (9) for $a_2 < \omega_0$ and (16) for $a_2 \geq \omega_0$, we obtain the renormalized phonon frequencies as

$$\omega_1 \approx |a_2 - \omega_0| [1 + \Theta(a_2 - \omega_0)], \quad (17)$$

$$\omega_2 \approx (\omega_0 - a_2) \Theta(\omega_0 - a_2). \quad (18)$$

Thus, the $\omega_2$ mode, which is related to the $A_1$ mode with frequency $1325 \, cmt^{-1}$ of ref. [9], vanishes for the solution $\bar{u} \neq 0$, as plotted in fig. 1. After having solved the SP equation for a uniform phonon field $\bar{u}$, we study the fluctuations around this solution. Fluctuations may play an important role and should modify the uniform solution due to the two-dimensionality of graphene. In particular, the fluctuations...
are crucial for the vanishing phonon frequency $\omega_2$ in eq. (18).

With the special SP solution $\bar{u}_0$ also any rotated phonon mode $O\bar{u}_0$ is a SP solution. Therefore, we can choose the special solution $\bar{u}_0 = (\bar{u}, 0)$ and, using the identity (8), obtain the action at the SP as

$$S \approx S_0 - \frac{1}{\beta} \log \left[ \det(1 + e^{-\beta(-i\Pi_3 \varphi + uU^\dagger U\Pi_1 U^\dagger)}) \right],$$

which is degenerated with respect to a global unitary transformation $U$. In order to study fluctuations around the SP solution we introduce a spatially fluctuating unitary matrix $U_r$. This can be cast into a nonlinear matrix field

$$\Phi_r = U_r \Pi_1 U_r^\dagger = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & e^{i\varphi_r} \\ e^{-i\varphi_r} & 0 \end{pmatrix} \Sigma_0,$$

such that the action becomes

$$S \approx S_0 - \frac{1}{\beta} \log \left[ \det(1 + e^{-\beta(-i\Pi_3 \varphi + u\Phi))}) \right].$$

This action can be expanded, either for $\bar{u}/t < 1$ or for $\bar{u}/t > 1$.

Now we assume that $\bar{u} > t$. Formally, $t$ can be chosen independently of the real bandwidth of the system. But this choice means that the physics is restricted to quasiparticles up to energy $t$. Then the expansion of the action $S$ of eq. (20) in powers of $1/\bar{u}$ provides a $U(1)$ nonlinear sigma model:

$$S \approx S_0' + F(\beta, \bar{u})Tr(\Phi \Phi \Phi)$$

with the prefactor

$$F(\beta, \bar{u}) = \frac{t^2}{\bar{u}^2} \left[ \frac{\bar{u}}{4} + \frac{1}{\beta} \ln(1 + e^{-\beta\bar{u}}) + \frac{1}{2} \frac{\bar{u}}{1 + e^{\beta\bar{u}}} \right].$$

Using the result of $\bar{u}$ for $\beta\bar{u} > \beta t \gg 1$, the $\beta$ dependence drops out of the prefactor:

$$F \sim \frac{t^2}{4\bar{u}} \sim \frac{t^2 \omega_0}{32\pi \alpha^2} \frac{1}{1 - t^2 \omega_0^2/16\alpha^4}.$$

This result can be considered as a renormalization effect for the temperature, where the renormalized dimensionless temperature reads

$$\tau = \frac{\bar{u}}{t^2} T \sim \frac{2\alpha^2}{\omega_0 t^2} \left( 1 - \frac{\pi t^2 \omega_0^2}{4\alpha^4} \right) T.$$

Here we have assumed $|E_F| < \bar{u}$ and have used the expression of $\bar{u}$ in eq. (13). As the electron-phonon coupling $\alpha$ increases, the renormalized temperature $\tau$ increases as well. This reflects the fact that the electronic fluctuations enhance the phonon fluctuations. The case $|E_F| > \bar{u}$ is rather unrealistic here, since we also have assumed $\bar{u} > t$.

The fluctuating term in eq. (21) represents an XY model for the angular fluctuations $\varphi_r$. Thus, the phonon fluctuations undergo a Berezinskii-Kosterlitz-Thouless (BKT) transition if $\tau_c$ is of order unity [25]. For temperatures below the BKT transition point $\tau_c$ the fluctuations are strongly correlated whereas above this temperature the correlations of the fluctuations decay exponentially due to the proliferation of vortex pairs.

We conclude from our calculation that second-order perturbation theory with respect to electron-phonon interaction reveals a phonon softening. This result is in agreement with other calculations [7,22,23]. For sufficiently large electron-phonon coupling the perturbative approach breaks down and a self-consistent calculation is necessary. We have used an SP approximation for the phonon fluctuations and found an instability of the perturbative approach due to a splitting of the optical phonon mode into an optical and an acoustic branch. The latter is related to a massless mode caused by the rotational symmetry of the system. It is characterized by long-ranged correlations of the phonon fluctuations, in contrast to the short-range fluctuations of the optical phonons. However, at sufficiently high temperatures these long-range correlations can undergo a BKT transition by the creation of vortex pairs, resulting again in short-range correlated fluctuations. The average lattice dimerization vanishes for all regimes as a consequence of the Mermin-Wagner argument. A possible way to observe the BKT transition experimentally is to measure the polarization in Raman scattering, since the photon polarization couples to the direction of the lattice distortions.

The instability of the intervalley phonons is very different from the instability of the Holstein (out-of-plane) phonons studied recently, where the phonons undergo an Ising transition [26]. In the latter case only short-range correlated fluctuations appear (except for the critical point) but the average distortion has a nonzero value.

To understand the effect of the thermal phonon fluctuations on the electronic transport properties, we can return to eq. (6). Then $\bar{u}_r$ produces a random gap in the electronic spectrum which has to be averaged with respect to the phonon distribution $e^{-\beta \varphi}/Z$. Thus, the effect of thermal phonons is similar to the effect of frozen correlated disorder, depending on the temperature of the sample though. Since an uncorrelated random gap with vanishing mean does not affect the minimal conductivity [27–29], we expect a similar result for thermally fluctuating intervalley phonons, at least near the Dirac point.

In conclusion, our calculation reveals that the electron-phonon interaction in graphene leads to a substantial renormalization of the intervalley phonons. For sufficiently strong electron-phonon coupling this causes an instability, where the phonon frequency vanishes and a new pair of phonons appears, consisting of an optical and an acoustic branch.

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We acknowledge financial support by the DFG grant ZI 305/5-1.
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