Detection of small exchange fields in S/F structures

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Abstract

Ferromagnetic materials with exchange fields $E_{\text{ex}}$ smaller or of the order of the superconducting gap $\Delta$ are important for applications of corresponding (s-wave) superconductor/ferromagnet/superconductor (SFS) junctions. Presently such materials are not known but there are several proposals how to create them. Small exchange fields are in principle difficult to detect. Based on our results we propose reliable detection methods of such small $E_{\text{ex}}$. For exchange fields smaller than the superconducting gap the subgap differential conductance of the normal metal-ferromagnet-insulator-superconductor (NFIS) junction shows a peak at the voltage bias equal to the exchange field of the ferromagnetic layer, $eV = E_{\text{ex}}$. Thus measuring the subgap conductance one can reliably determine small $E_{\text{ex}} < \Delta$. In the opposite case $E_{\text{ex}} > \Delta$ one can determine the exchange field in scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) experiment. The density of states of the FS bilayer measured at the outer border of the ferromagnet shows a peak at the energy equal to the exchange field, $E = E_{\text{ex}}$. This peak can be only visible for small enough exchange fields of the order of few $\Delta$.

Key words: exchange field, S/F hybrid systems, proximity effect

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1. Introduction

As we know from the quantum theory of magnetism the ferromagnetic metal can be described by the presence of the so called exchange field, $E_{\text{ex}}$. This field is responsible to many interesting phenomena in artificially fabricated superconductor/ferromagnet (S/F) hybrid structures [1]. Let us briefly review the essence of the S/F proximity effect.

Upon entering of the Cooper pair into the ferromagnetic metal it becomes an evanescent state and the spin up electron in the pair lowers its potential energy by $E_{\text{ex}}$, while the spin down electron raises its potential energy by the same amount. In order for each electron to conserve its total energy, the spin up electron must increase its kinetic energy, while the spin down electron must decrease its kinetic energy, to make up for these additional potential energies in F. As a consequence, the center of mass motion is modulated and superconducting correlations in the F layer have the damped oscillatory behavior [2]. If we neglect the influence of other possible parameters of ferromagnetic metal (like magnetic scattering rate, etc.) the characteristic lengths of the decay and the oscillations are equal to $\xi_f = \sqrt{D_f/E_{\text{ex}}}$, where $D_f$ is the diffusion coefficient in the ferromagnetic metal [1].

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The length $\xi_f$ is also the length of decay and oscillations of the critical current in Josephson S/F/S junctions [3,4]. Negative sign of the critical current corresponds to the so-called $\pi$-state [5-9]. S/F/S $\pi$-junctions have been proposed as potential elements in superconducting classical and quantum logic circuits [10-12]. For instance, S/F/S junctions can be used as complementary elements ($\pi$-shifters) in RSFQ circuits (see Ref. [13] and references therein). S/F/S based devices were also proposed as elements for superconducting spintronics [14]. Finally, S/F/S structures have been proposed for the realization of so-called $\phi$-junctions with a $\phi$ drop in the ground state, where $0 < \phi < \pi$ [15].

Presently known ferromagnetic materials have large exchange fields, $E_{ex} \gg \Delta$ and therefore short characteristic length of oscillations, $\xi_f \ll \xi_s$, where $\xi_s = \sqrt{D_s/2\Delta}$ is the superconducting coherence length and $D_s$ is the diffusion coefficient in the superconductor. This requires very high precision in controlling the F layer thickness in the fabrication process of the Josephson $\pi$-junctions. In already existing S/F/S structures the roughness is often larger than the desired precision. The way to solve this problem is to invent ferromagnetic materials with small exchange fields.

In this paper we review several proposals for ferromagnetic materials with exchange fields $E_{ex}$ smaller or of the order of the superconducting gap $\Delta$. Then based on our results we propose reliable detection methods of such small exchange fields in experiments. Another detection method was recently suggested in [16].

2. Ways to generate small exchange fields

The easiest way to create small exchange field is to apply an external magnetic field $B$ to the normal metal lead, in which case $E_{ex} = \mu_B B$, where $\mu_B$ is the Bohr magneton.

It may be also an intrinsic exchange field of weak ferromagnetic alloys. For example, in Ref. [17] were reported exchange fields for Pd$_{1-x}$Ni$_x$ with different Ni concentration, obtained by a fitting procedure. Considering Nb as a superconductor with $\Delta = 1.3$ meV, we can estimate the exchange field in Pd$_{1-x}$Ni$_x$: for 7% of Ni fitting gives $E_{ex} = 2.8$ meV, which is 2.2 $\Delta$, and for 11.5% of Ni $E_{ex} = 3.9$ meV, which is 3 $\Delta$.

In another recent proposal [18], a thin normal metal layer was placed on top of the ferromagnetic insulator. It was shown that the ferromagnetic insulator may induce small exchange field in the normal metal layer. Interestingly, such exchange field is possible to tune since it is inversely proportional to the normal metal layer thickness.

Below we suggest direct measurements of such small exchange fields. The detection methods are different in case of the exchange field smaller, $E_{ex} < \Delta$, and larger than the superconducting gap, $E_{ex} > \Delta$.

3. Detection of exchange fields smaller than the superconducting gap

In this section we consider the following SIFN structure: a ferromagnetic wire $F$ of a length $d_f$ (smaller than the inelastic relaxation length [19,20]) is attached at $x = 0$ to a superconducting (S) and at $x = d_f$ to a normal (N) electrode. The interface at $x = 0$ is a tunnel barrier while at $x = d_f$ we have a transparent interface. We will show that the subgap differential conductance of such a structure has a peak at the bias voltage equal to the exchange field of the ferromagnetic metal in case when $E_{ex} < \Delta$ [21,22]. Thus we propose to determine small $E_{ex} \ll \Delta$ in experiments by measuring the subgap different conductance of NFIS junctions at low temperatures.

In this paper we consider the diffusive limit, i.e. we assume that the elastic scattering length is much smaller than the decay length of the superconducting condensate into the F region. Here and below we consider for simplicity $D_f = D_s \equiv D$ and $\hbar = k_B = 1$. In order to describe the transport properties of the system we solve the Usadel equation in the F layer that in the so called $\theta$-parametrization reads [23]

$$\frac{D}{2i}\partial_x^2 \Theta_{\uparrow} = (E \pm E_{ex}) \sinh \Theta_{\uparrow}. \tag{1}$$

Here the positive and negative signs correspond to the spin-up $\uparrow$ and spin-down $\downarrow$ states, respectively. Because of the high transparency of the F/N interface the functions $\Theta_{\uparrow} = 0$ at $x = d_f$. While at the tunneling interface at $x = 0$ we use the Kupriyanov-Lukichev boundary condition [24]

$$\partial_x \Theta_{\uparrow}\big|_{x=0} = -\frac{R_F}{d_f R_T} \sinh \left[\Theta_{\uparrow}\big|_{x=0} - \Theta_s\right], \tag{2}$$

where $R_F$ and $R_T$ are the normal resistances of the F layer and SF interface, respectively ($R_T \gg R_F$), and $\Theta_s = \arctan(\Delta/E)$ is the superconducting bulk value of the parametrization angle in the S layer, $\Theta_s$. Once the functions $\Theta_{\uparrow}$ are obtained one can compute the current through the junction. In particular we are interested in the Andreev current, i.e. the current for voltages smaller than the superconducting gap due to Andreev processes at the S/F interface.
Due to the the tunneling barrier at the S/F interface the proximity effect is weak and hence we linearize Eqs. (1-2) with respect to $R_F/R_T \ll 1$. After a straightforward calculation we obtain the Andreev current at zero temperature in this limit [25,26],

$$I_A = \frac{W\Delta^2}{4eR_T} \sum_{f=\pm} \int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{dE}{\Delta^2 - E^2} \times \text{Re} \left[ \frac{i\Delta}{E + jE_{ex}} \tanh \left( \sqrt{E + jE_{ex} \frac{d_f}{\tilde{\xi}_f}} \right) \right], \tag{3}$$

where $W = \tilde{\xi}_f R_F / d_f R_T$ is the diffusive tunneling parameter [24,27,28]. In the tunneling limit $W \ll 1$.

We evaluate Eq.(3) in the long-junction limit, i.e. when $d_f \gg \tilde{\xi}_f$, and $E_{ex} \ll eV < \Delta$. We obtain for the Andreev current

$$I_A = \frac{\Delta \xi_f R_F}{ed_f R_T} \sum_{f=\pm} \frac{\arctanh(c_j^+)}{\sqrt{\Delta \delta E_{ex}}} + \arctan(c_j^-), \tag{4}$$

$$c_j^+ = \sqrt{\frac{E + jE_{ex}}{\Delta + jE_{ex}}}, \quad c_j^- = \sqrt{\frac{E - jE_{ex}}{\Delta + jE_{ex}}}.$$

In Fig. 1 we plot the Andreev differential conductance $G_A = dI_A/dV$ which is equal to the full differential conductance of the junction at zero temperature. The conductance shows two well defined peaks, one at $eV = E_{ex}$ and the other at $eV = \Delta$. The physical explanation of the peak at $E_{ex}$ is given in [21]. Detecting this peak one can carefully measure the value of small exchange field $E_{ex} < \Delta$ in the ferromagnetic metal.

4. Detection of exchange fields larger than the superconducting gap

In this section we consider just a simple FS bilayer with a transparent interface: wire F of a length $d_f$ (smaller than the inelastic relaxation length [19,20]) is attached at $x = 0$ to a superconducting electrode by a transparent interface. We will show that the density of states (DOS) measured at the outer border of the ferromagnet ($x = d_f$) shows a peak at the energy equal to the exchange field for $d_f \gg \tilde{\xi}_f$ in case when $E_{ex}$ is of the order of few $\Delta$ [4,29]. Thus we propose to determine $E_{ex} > \Delta$ in experiments by measuring the DOS at the outer border of the ferromagnetic metal in corresponding SF bilayer structure, which can be done by scanning tunneling microscopy (STM).

The DOS $N_f(E)$ normalized to the DOS in the normal state, can be written as

$$N_f(E) = \frac{[N_{f\uparrow}(E) + N_{f\downarrow}(E)]}{2}, \tag{5}$$

where $N_{f\uparrow}(E)$ are the spin resolved DOS written in terms of spectral angle $\theta_f$,

$$N_{f\uparrow}(E) = \text{Re} \left[ \cos \theta_{f\uparrow}(E) \right]. \tag{6}$$

To obtain $N_f$, we use a self-consistent two-step iterative procedure [4,30]. In the first step we calculate the pair potential coordinate dependence $\Delta(x)$ using the self-consistency equation in the S layer in the Matsubara representation. Then, using the $\Delta(x)$ dependence, we solve the Usadel equations in the S layer,

$$\frac{D}{2i} \frac{d^2}{dx} \theta_f = E \sinh \theta_f + i E x \cosh \theta_f \sin \theta_f,$$ (7)

together with the Usadel equations in the F layer [Eq. (1)] and corresponding boundary conditions, repeating the iterations until convergency is reached [4]. At the outer border of the ferromagnet ($x = d_f$) we have $\partial_x \theta_{f\uparrow}(0) = 0$. At $x = 0$ we use Kupriyanov-Lukichev boundary conditions which in case of the transparent interface is convenient to write as

$$\gamma \partial_x \theta_{f\uparrow} |_{x=0} = 0, \quad \xi_f \gamma_0 \theta_{f\uparrow} |_{x=0} = 0, \tag{8a}$$

$$\xi_{ex} \gamma_0 \partial_x \theta_{f\downarrow} |_{x=0} = \sinh(\theta_f - \theta_f) |_{x=0}. \tag{8b}$$

Here $\gamma = \sigma_f / \sigma_s$, $\sigma_f$ are the conductivities of the F (S) layers correspondingly, $\xi_f = \sqrt{D_f / 2\pi T_c}, T_c$ is the critical temperature of the superconductor, and $\gamma_0 = d_f R_T / \tilde{\xi}_f R_F = \tilde{\xi}_s / \tilde{\xi}_f W$. The parameter $\gamma$ determines the strength of suppression of superconductivity in the S layer near the interface (inverse proximity effect). No suppression occurs for $\gamma = 0$, while strong suppression takes place for $\gamma \gg 1$. In our numerical calculations we assume small $\gamma \ll 1$. Since we consider the transparent interface $R_F \gg R_T$ and contrary to the previous section $W \gg 1$, therefore $\gamma_0 \ll 1$. Notice that in the Eqs. (7)-(8) we have omitted the subscripts $\uparrow$ ($\downarrow$) because equations for both spin directions are identical in the superconductor.

In Fig. 2 we plot the DOS $N_f(E)$ at the outer border of the F layer in the FS bilayer calculated numerically
the FS bilayer calculated numerically for different values of the exchange field $E_{\text{ex}}$. Parameters of the FS interface are $\gamma = \gamma_0 = 0.01$, $T = 0.17$. Plots (a) and (b): $d_f/\xi_f = 1$; plots (c) and (d): $d_f/\xi_f = 3$. For plots (a) and (c) solid black line corresponds to $E_{\text{ex}}/\Delta = 2$, dashed red line to $E_{\text{ex}}/\Delta = 2.5$, dash-dotted blue line to $E_{\text{ex}}/\Delta = 3$. For plots (b) and (d) solid black line corresponds to $E_{\text{ex}}/\Delta = 4$, dashed red line to $E_{\text{ex}}/\Delta = 5$, dash-dotted blue line to $E_{\text{ex}}/\Delta = 6$.

For different values of the exchange field $E_{\text{ex}}$ and for different F layer thicknesses $d_f$. At large enough $d_f$ we see the peak at $E = E_{\text{ex}}$ [see Fig. 2 (c) and (d)]. For small $d_f$ the peak is not visible and DOS tends monotonously to unity for $E > \Delta$ [see Fig. 2 (a) and (b)]. The amplitude of the peak is decreasing with increasing $E_{\text{ex}}$; peak is only visible for $E_{\text{ex}}$ of the order of few $\Delta$ (see [4] for details).

To better illustrate the conditions when the peak at $E = E_{\text{ex}}$ is visible in experiments we consider an analytic limiting case. If the F layer is thick enough ($d_f \gg \xi_f$) and $\gamma = 0$ in Eq. (8), the DOS at the outer border of the ferromagnet can be written as [3,31]

$$N_f(\theta_\text{f}) = \frac{8F(E)}{F^2(E) + 1 + 1}\exp\left(-\frac{d_f}{\xi_f}\right). \quad (10)$$

Here $\theta_\text{f}$ is the boundary value of $\theta$ at $x = d_f$, given by

$$\theta_\text{f} = \frac{\theta_\text{f}^{(1)}(x)}{F(E)}/\sqrt{F^2(E) + 1 + 1}\exp\left(-\frac{d_f}{\xi_f}\right) + i0. \quad (11b)$$

From Eqs. (9)-(10) we obtain for the full DOS the following expression in the limit $d_f \gg \xi_f$ and for $E \geq \Delta$,

$$N_f(E) = 1 + \sum_{j=\pm} \frac{16\Delta^2 \cos(b_j) \exp(-b_j)}{(E + \epsilon)(\sqrt{E + \epsilon} + \sqrt{2E})^2}, \quad (12)$$

$$b_j = \frac{2d_f}{\xi_f} \sqrt{\frac{E + jE_{\text{ex}}}{E_{\text{ex}}}}, \quad \epsilon = \sqrt{E^2 - \Delta^2}.$$
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