Transition from a mixed to a pure $d$-wave symmetry in superconducting optimally doped YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-x}$ thin films under applied fields

G. Elhalel, R. Beck, G. Leibovitch, and G. Deutscher

School of Physics and astronomy, Raymond and Beverly Sackler Faculty of Exact Sciences, Tel-Aviv University, Tel Aviv, 69978, Israel

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We have probed the Landau levels of nodal quasi-particles by tunneling along a nodal direction of (110) oriented YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-x}$ thin films with a magnetic field applied perpendicular to the CuO$_2$ planes, and parallel to the film’s surface. In optimally doped films and at low temperature, finite energy nodal states are clearly observed in films thinner than the London penetration depth. Above a well defined temperature the order parameter reverts to a pure $d$-wave symmetry.

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The pairing interaction responsible for superconductivity in the high temperature superconductors is still under debate. There is much experimental evidence showing that the order parameter has a dominant $d_{x^2-y^2}$ symmetry [1, 2], but important questions such as the nature of quasi-particle states in the under-doped region and the existence of a minority component of the order parameter are still under debate [3]. Studying the density of states in the under-doped regime Meissner currents are observed by taking measurements on films thinner than the London penetration depth, and conclude that a field in the mixed state Meissner currents are observed by taking measurements on films thinner than the London penetration depth.

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In an effort to establish more firmly the origin of the field induced finite bias conductance peaks, we have made a series of tunneling measurements as a function of field and temperature on films thinner than the London penetration depth. Both the Bean Livingston and the Bean currents must then be quite weak, since screening currents generated on opposite faces of the film cancel each other. If the origin of the finite bias peaks seen in thick films is a Doppler shift of zero energy surface bound states, they should not occur at all in thin films, either in increasing or in decreasing fields. If, on the other hand, they are basically due to field induced finite energy nodal states, they should persist in the thin films with no field hysteresis, and follow the $H^{1/2}$. As we now describe in detail, this is indeed what we have found.

We fabricated (110) oriented YBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-x}$ thin films by DC off-axis sputtering on (110) SrTiO$_3$ substrates with one of the surface edges parallel to the c-axis. A PrBa$_2$Cu$_3$O$_{7-x}$ buffer layer was first deposited by off-axis RF sputtering in order to reduce the growth of (103) oriented grains [16]. The thickness of the samples is less than 500 Å. X-ray diffraction reveals peaks corresponding to the (110) orientation, the $T_c$ of the samples ranged from 84 K to 89 K down-set. The films’ surface is relatively smooth, having an average surface roughness of few tens of angstroms according to atomic force microscope measurements. We verified the in-plane orientation by comparing the normal state resistance along the two different directions and found the expected anisotropy [16].

The tunneling junctions are produced by pressing Indium thin pads on fresh samples, as described elsewhere [14, 17]. The configuration of the sample and the field orientation is shown in Fig. 1. The Indium-Oxide layer, which is created in the area of contact, results in junction resistances in the range of 1-15 Ω. This process may reduce the oxygen concentration in the junctions’ area, especially in very thin samples. In order to alleviate this effect, we grew our films in the presence of a reduced vapor pressure of water, which results in increased oxygen content in the film [18]. The junctions are stable under thermal cycles, and the junctions' resistance remains unchanged if kept in a helium gas environment. This allows us to measure the temperature dependence of their tunneling characteristic, if necessary by performing successive cooling runs under various applied fields. The planar junction technique averages the tunneling conductance at a macroscopic length scale in contrast to scanning tunneling microscopy measurements which give sharper peak features [19]. However, its stability over thermal and magnetic fields cycles is of great advantage for the present work.

In Fig. 2a we show the differential conductance obtained on a thin film at 4.2 K, measured at magnetic fields $H=0$, 6 and 12 T, in increasing and decreasing fields. At zero magnetic field, there is a clear peak at zero bias, as
expected for a (110) oriented film. This peak splits into two spectral peaks in the presence of a finite magnetic field. The conductance spectra in increasing and decreasing fields are almost identical as opposed to the high hysteretic behavior of the spectral peaks in thicker samples as shown in Fig. 2b and in Ref. [14, 17]. This highly hysteretic behavior has been ascribed to strong screening currents in increasing fields and much weaker ones in decreasing fields as discussed above. [15, 20]. The negligible hysteresis observed in our thin samples implies that the screening currents are very low even in increasing fields and that the two finite peaks cannot be due to a Doppler shift of the zero energy bound states. The difference between the behavior of thin and thick films is particularly dramatic in increasing fields, where the spectral peaks cannot be identified anymore at all in thick samples. This is because the Doppler shift, due to Meissner currents, widens the peaks and pushes them into high bias where they are merged with the background and the main gap structure (Fig. 2b).

We define the minority gap peak value, $\delta$, as half the distance between the positive and negative bias conductance peaks (see Fig. 2b). In our thin films, $\delta(H)$ follows the $H^{1/2}$ behavior as shown in Fig. 4. This is in agreement with measurements performed earlier on thick films in decreasing fields [15, 20] and confirms the assumption that Meissner currents are weak in that case, but may be not negligible in view of the smaller slope obtained here.

Measuring the tunneling spectrum at various magnetic fields and temperatures, we find that in a fixed magnetic field, the minority gap peak value disappears above a well defined temperature. For example, we show in Fig. 3a the measured conductance in a field of 7 T at various temperatures. At 1.6 K, there are two clear peaks at ±1.75 mV. As the temperature rises, the conductance at zero bias increases until the finite bias peaks completely disappear at 8.5 K. The conductance at high biases is independent of temperature as expected for tunneling, assuring us that the junction characteristics remain intact.

However, in order to be able to properly assert if there is a temperature induced modification of the density of states at low bias, one must take into account the effect of thermal smearing on the tunneling spectra. Therefore, we have convoluted the tunneling spectra measured at the lowest temperature (below 1.6 K) with the derivative of the Fermi-Dirac distribution function at the desired temperature. Previous scanning tunneling measurements showed that the density of states hardly changes at such low temperatures [21]. Therefore, using our procedure, we have calculated a thermally smeared curve for higher temperatures and thus estimated the effect of thermal smearing on the low energy spectrum. Figure 3b shows the measurement taken at 8.5 K (red full line) and the result of smearing the 1.6 K measurement to 8.5 K (black dashed line). While the smeared curve still shows two distinct peaks, the measurement does not, but rather exhibits a peak at zero bias. It is therefore clear that temperature induces a change in the density of states. At biases higher than 5 mV, the two curves are identical.

A representative graph of the minority gap value versus temperature for various values of the applied field is shown in Fig. 4a. The minority gap value is approximately constant at low temperatures and disappears abruptly at a temperature, which we define as $T_{CF}$. The minor initial rise in the sub gap peaks’ value is an effect of thermal smearing.

The value of $T_{CF}$ increases with the applied field and the resulting low temperature conductance peak value. We find that they obey the universal linear relation $k_B T_{CF} = 0.34 \delta$ as shown in Fig. 4b. The data points in the graph were taken from five different samples with different characteristics (one of the points was measured on a thick sample in decreasing field), which implies the universality of the proportionality constant. The measured slope is smaller than Laughlins’ prediction $k_B T_{CF} = 0.52 \delta$. Laughlins’ calculation was performed for bulk materials, while our measurements were done on very thin films, which are highly susceptible to surface effects. Laughlin did not mention the length scale of the currents responsible for the dipole moments. If the thickness of the film is comparable to the aforementioned length scale, interaction between the currents resulting in a partial cancellation of the opposite currents should be considered. This might contribute to the disagreement between the theoretical ratio and our experimental result.

A way to distinguish between the Doppler shift effect and the minority component induced by the applied field, is by their respective temperature dependence. A first order phase transition that leads to the abrupt disappearance of the minority order parameter at high temperatures has been predicted [6]. On the other hand, screening currents and the accompanying Doppler shift...
measurements were performed on much thicker crystals where contradiction with our conclusions, because these measurements significantly lower than $T_C$ [22]. In addition to the small field hysteresis in the position of the finite bias peaks, their sharp disappearance at a well defined temperature rules out that a Doppler shift of the zero energy surface bound states is at their origin.

The proposed interpretation of the experiments that we have described requires that the scattering time of nodal quasi-particles be long compared to the time it takes them to complete a Saint-James cycle. This appears to be true at optimum doping, but not away from it as we show in a separate publication [23].

In conclusion, we claim that the field induced spectral peaks seen in nodal tunneling in very thin films result from the formation of a minority order parameter, and cannot be attributed to a Doppler shift of the zero energy states due to Meissner screening currents. The square root dependency of the spectral peak positions in the magnetic field strength, the absence of field hysteresis and their abrupt disappearance with temperature are all in favor a field induced $id_{xy}$ minority imaginary order parameter at low temperatures and a transition to a pure $d$-wave order parameter at high temperatures, as predicted by Laughlin. Our findings are in general agreement with his model, but a comparison of the way in which the tunneling density of states evolves with temperature would require a more detailed theory than is now available. The absence of a minority order parameter inferred from the heat capacity square root field dependence [24] is not in contradiction with our conclusions, because these measurements were performed on much thicker crystals where superfluid currents are strong (and at the origin of the square root dependence) and predicted to render the minority component unobservable [7].

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* Electronic address: guyde@post.tau.ac.il

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![FIG. 4: (color online) (a) The spectral peak values versus temperature obtained from different applied magnetic fields. (b) The temperature at which the spectral peak disappears versus the peak value at low temperatures.](image-url)