Mechanisms of spin-polarized current-driven magnetization switching

S. Zhang
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO 65211

P. M. Levy
Department of Physics, New York University, 4 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003

A. Fert
Unité Mixte de Physique CNRS/THALES (CNRS-UMR 137)
Domaine de Corbeville, 91404 Orsay, France

Abstract

The mechanisms of the magnetization switching of magnetic multilayers driven by a current are studied by including exchange interaction between local moments and spin accumulation of conduction electrons. It is found that this exchange interaction leads to two additional terms in the Landau-Lifshitz-Gilbert equation: an effective field and a spin torque. Both terms are proportional to the transverse spin accumulation and have comparable magnitudes.

The concept of switching the orientation of a magnetic layer of a multilayered structure by the current perpendicular to the layers was introduced by Slonczewski [1] and Berger [2], and has been followed up by Waintal et al. [3]. The central idea is that for a noncollinear configuration of the moments of the magnetic layer the current induces a torque acting on the spins of the conduction electrons which in turn transmit this torque to the background magnetization of the magnetic layers through the exchange interaction between conduction
electrons and the local “d” electrons. An alternate mechanism of current induced switching was put forth by Heide et al \cite{4} in which the current across the magnetically inhomogeneous multilayer produces spin accumulation which establishes an energy preference for a parallel or antiparallel alignment of the moments of the magnetic layers; this magnetic “coupling” was posited to produce switching. Recent experiments have reliably demonstrated that the magnetization of a magnetic layered structure is indeed switched back and forth by an applied current \cite{5–7}. However, it is unclear whether the magnetization switching is triggered by the current-driven effective field or by the spin torque mechanism or both.

Here we examine the two views of current induced switching, spin torque and effective field, by solving the equations of motion for the spin accumulation and the local magnetization. We find the two mechanisms do coexist; albeit in form very different from that envisaged by the above referenced authors. The salient difference between our treatment of spin diffusion and previous treatments \cite{8–10}, lies in the inclusion of the exchange interaction between the spin accumulation and the magnetic background. With our results, we can understand these two mechanisms on an equal footing: both are simultaneously derived and both depend on the same set of parameters used for understanding the giant magnetoresistance when the current is perpendicular to the plane of the layers (CPP). Furthermore, we have introduced a new length scale for the transverse spin accumulation and clarified the ferromagnetic layer thickness dependence of the switching dynamics.

Let us consider a magnetic multilayer with the current perpendicular to the plane of the layer (defined as $x$-direction). The linear response of the current to the electrical field can be written as a spinor form,

$$\hat{j}(x) = \hat{C}E(x) - \dot{\hat{D}}\frac{\partial\hat{n}}{\partial x}, \quad (1)$$

where $E(x)$ is the electric field, $\hat{j}$, $\hat{C}$, $\dot{\hat{D}}$, and $\hat{n}$ are the $2\times2$ matrices representing the current, the conductivity, the diffusion constant, and the accumulation at a given position. The diffusion constant and the conductivity are related via the Einstein relation $\hat{C} = e^2\hat{N}(\epsilon_F)\dot{\hat{D}}$ for a degenerate metal, where $\hat{N}(\epsilon_F)$ is the density of states at the Fermi level. In general,
one can express these matrices in terms of the Pauli spin matrix \( \sigma \),

\[
\hat{C} = C_0 \hat{I} + \sigma \cdot C, \tag{2}
\]

\[
\hat{D} = D_0 \hat{I} + \sigma \cdot D, \tag{3}
\]

and

\[
\hat{n} = n_0 \hat{I} + \sigma \cdot m, \tag{4}
\]

where \( 2n_0 \) is the charge accumulation and \( m \) is the spin accumulation. By placing Eqs. (2)-(4) into (1), we rewrite the linear response in terms of the electric current \( j_e \) and magnetization current \( j_m \) as

\[
j_e \equiv \text{Re}(\text{Tr} \hat{j}) = 2C_0E(x) - 2D_0 \frac{\partial n_0}{\partial x} - 2D \cdot \frac{\partial m}{\partial x}, \tag{5}\]

and

\[
j_m = \text{ReTr}(\sigma \hat{j}) = 2CE(x) - 2D \frac{\partial n_0}{\partial x} - 2D_0 \frac{\partial m}{\partial x}. \tag{6}\]

It is noted that we have chosen the unit \( e = \mu_B = 1 \) for the notation convenience so that the electrical current and the magnetization current have the same unit. For a transition ferromagnet, one defines the spin polarization parameter \( \beta \) as \( C = \beta C_0 M_d \), where \( M_d \) is the unit vector to represent the direction of the local magnetization. Similarly, we can introduce a spin polarization \( \beta' \) for the diffusion constant \( D = \beta'D_0 M_d \). These two polarization parameters are not necessarily the same, i.e., when the density of states are different for spin up and down electrons, \( \beta \neq \beta' \). By inserting these relations into Eqs. (5) and (6), and eliminating the electric field and charge density, we obtain

\[
j_m = \beta j_e M_d - 2D_0 \left[ \frac{\partial m}{\partial x} - \beta \beta' M_d (M_d \cdot \frac{\partial m}{\partial x}) \right], \tag{7}\]

where we have dropped an uninteresting term proportional to the derivative of the charge accumulation \( \partial n_0/\partial x \). This result is similar to that obtained by Heide [1].
We now describe the equations of motion for the spin accumulation and local magnetization when we turn on the interaction between the spin accumulation and the local moment via the sd contact interaction,

\[ H_{\text{int}} = -J \mathbf{m} \cdot \mathbf{M}_d. \]  

(8)

With this interaction, the equation of motion for the spin accumulation is

\[ \frac{d\mathbf{m}}{dt} + \left( \frac{J}{\hbar} \right) \mathbf{m} \times \mathbf{M}_d = -\frac{\mathbf{m}}{\tau_{sf}}, \]

(9)

where \( \tau_{sf} \) is the spin-flip relaxation time of the conduction electron. The second term on the left hand side represents the processional motion of the accumulation due to the sd interaction when the magnetization directions of the spin accumulation and the local moments are not parallel. Since the conduction electrons carry a spin current given by Eq. (7), we replace \( \frac{d\mathbf{m}}{dt} \) by \( \frac{\partial \mathbf{m}}{\partial t} + \frac{\partial \mathbf{m}}{\partial x} \). By using Eq. (7), we find

\[ \frac{1}{2D_0} \frac{\partial \mathbf{m}}{\partial t} = \frac{\partial^2 \mathbf{m}}{\partial x^2} - \beta' \mathbf{M}_d \left( \mathbf{M}_d \cdot \frac{\partial^2 \mathbf{m}}{\partial x^2} \right) - \frac{\mathbf{m}}{\lambda_{sf}^2} - \frac{\mathbf{m} \times \mathbf{M}_d}{\lambda_J^2}, \]

(10)

where we have defined \( \lambda_{sf} \equiv \sqrt{2D_0 \tau_{sf}} \) and \( \lambda_J \equiv \sqrt{2\hbar D_0/J} \) \[12\]. The latter gives rise to a new length scale which governs the spin torque created by the current. The significance of this new length scale will be discussed later.

The equation of motion for the local magnetization is

\[ \frac{d\mathbf{M}_d}{dt} = -\gamma_0 \mathbf{M}_d \times (\mathbf{H}_e + J\mathbf{m}) + \alpha \mathbf{M}_d \times \frac{d\mathbf{M}_d}{dt}, \]

(11)

where \( \gamma_0 \) is the gyromagnetic ratio, \( \mathbf{H}_e \) is the magnetic field including the contributions from the external field, anisotropy and magnetostatic field, the additional effective field \( J\mathbf{m} \) is due to coupling between the local moment and the spin accumulation, and the last term is the Gilbert damping term.

To solve for the dynamics of the spin accumulation and the local moment, we need to simultaneously determine them using Eqs. (10) and (11). The time scales are very different for the spin accumulation and the local moments. The characteristic time scales of the
former are of the order of $\tau_{sf}$ and $\hbar/J$, see Eq. (9), i.e., of the order of picoseconds ($10^{-12}$ seconds). For the local moment, the time scale is $\gamma_0^{-1}(H_e + Jm_\perp)^{-1}$. For a magnetic field of the order of 0.1 Tesla, this time scale is of the order of nanoseconds. Therefore, as long as one is interested in the magnetization process of the local moments, one can always treat the spin accumulation in the limit of long times. The two dynamic equations are then simply decoupled: we first solves Eq. (10) with fixed local moments (independent of time) and set the left hand side of Eq. (10) to zero. Once the spin accumulation is obtained, we substitute it into Eq. (11) to solve the dynamics of the local moments.

Before we proceed to solve for the stationary solution of Eq. (10), let us first discuss the general features derived from Eq. (10). We separate the spin accumulation into longitudinal (parallel to the local moment) and transverse (perpendicular to the local moment) modes. Equation (10) can now be written as

$$\frac{\partial^2 m_\parallel}{\partial x^2} - \frac{m_\parallel}{\lambda_{sdl}^2} = 0, \quad (12)$$

where $\lambda_{sdl} = \sqrt{1 - \beta\beta'} \lambda_{sf}$, and

$$\frac{\partial^2 m_\perp}{\partial x^2} - \frac{m_\perp}{\lambda_{sf}^2} - \frac{m_\perp \times M_d}{\lambda_J^2} = 0. \quad (13)$$

The longitudinal spin accumulation $m_\parallel$ decays at the length scale of the spin diffusion length $\lambda_{sdl}$ while the transverse spin accumulation $m_\perp$ decays as $\lambda_J$. The spin diffusion length $\lambda_{sdl}$ has been measured to be about 60nm in Co [13]. We estimate $\lambda_J$ by taking the typical diffusion constant of a metal to be $10^{-3}$ (m$^2$/s) and $J = 0.1 - 0.4$ (eV) so that $\lambda_J$ is about 1.2 nm to 2.4 nm. Thus, the transverse spin accumulation has a much shorter length scale compared to the longitudinal one.

Before we apply Eqs. (12) and (13) to a multilayer structure, we take a look at the influence of the spin accumulation on the local moment. As seen from Eq. (11), the longitudinal spin accumulation has no effect on the local moment. We may re-write Eq. (11) in terms of the transverse spin accumulation only,

$$\frac{dM_d}{dt} = -\gamma_0 M_d \times (H_e + Jm_\perp) + \alpha M_d \times \frac{dM_d}{dt}. \quad (14)$$
To discuss the transverse accumulation we introduce a vector $A$ such that $J\mathbf{m}_\perp = A \times \mathbf{M}_d$. If one considers a system with two ferromagnetic layers whose magnetization directions are not parallel to each other, the spin accumulation at one layer depends on the orientation of the other. Let us suppose that the above equation is used for the layer $F_1$, i.e., denote $\mathbf{M}_d = \mathbf{M}_d^{(1)}$. The magnetization of the other layer is labeled as $\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)}$. Without loss of generality, we can write the two components of the accumulation in the plane transverse to $\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)}$ as $J\mathbf{m}_\perp = a\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)} \times \mathbf{M}_d^{(1)} + b(\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)} \times \mathbf{M}_d^{(2)}) \times \mathbf{M}_d^{(1)}$, where $a$ and $b$ are determined by geometric details of the multilayer. Placing this into Eq. (14), we find

$$\frac{d\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)}}{dt} = -\gamma_0 \mathbf{M}_d^{(1)} \times (H_e + b\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)}) - \gamma_0 a\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)} \times (\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)} \times \mathbf{M}_d^{(1)}) + \alpha\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)} \times \frac{d\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)}}{dt}. \quad (15)$$

Thus the transverse spin accumulation produces two effects simultaneously (one can call them either fields or torques): one is $b\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)}$ the “effective field” which gives rise to a precessional motion and the other is $a\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)} \times (\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)} \times \mathbf{M}_d^{(1)})$ which is called the “spin torque”. Both terms lead to significant corrections to the original Landau-Lifshitz-Gilbert equation. It has been shown that both terms are capable to switch the magnetic moments $[14]$. Note the effective field introduced here looks as if it arises from the current induced coupling named NEXI, however it is different as NEXI was attributed to the longitudinal component of the spin accumulation $[11]$. In contrast we have shown that only the transverse spin accumulation must be taken into account and that the longitudinal accumulation does not produce any effect on the motion of local moments. An even more striking difference is Heide’s finding that “the presence of a second ferromagnetic layer is not necessary”. This is because his longitudinal accumulation exists for a single F layer, while a second F layer with tilted magnetization is required for transverse accumulation and for our mechanism. It is notable that the “torque” term, first introduced by J. Slonczewski, appears on an equal footing with the effective field $b\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)}$ as both are related to the transverse spin accumulation.

We now explicitly verify that the solution of the transverse accumulation $\mathbf{m}_\perp$ indeed has our proposed general form and we quantitatively determine the magnitude of the effective field (proportional to $b$ term) and the “spin torque” (proportional to $a$ term) entering
Eq. (15). To obtain a physically transparent solution of the spin accumulation, we choose an oversimplified case to perform our calculation so that the effective field and spin torque can be analytically derived. We consider a system consisting of a very thick ferromagnetic layer which is assumed to be pinned, a spacer layer which is infinitely thin so that the spin current is conserved across the layer when there is no spin flip scattering in this region, and a thin ferromagnetic layer backed by an ideal paramagnetic layer. In addition we make our calculation simpler by neglecting spin-dependent reflection at the interfaces. In such a system, we look for the solution of the spin accumulation in the thin F1 layer whose magnetization direction is at the positive $z$-direction. The magnetization direction of the pinned layer is $\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)} = \cos \theta \mathbf{e}_z - \sin \theta \mathbf{e}_y$ where $\theta$ is the angle between $\mathbf{M}_d^{(2)}$ and $\mathbf{M}_d^{(1)} = \mathbf{e}_z$.

From Eqs. (12) and (13), and by assuming the same $\lambda_{sdl}$ for the thin magnetic layer, F1, as for the non-magnetic layer which backs it, we write the solution for the F1 layer as

$$m_z(x) = G_1 \exp \left(-x/\lambda_{sdl}\right) \quad (16)$$

$$m_x(x) = G_2 \exp \left(-x/l_+\right) + G_3 \exp \left(-x/l_-\right) \quad (17)$$

$$m_y(x) = -iG_2 \exp \left(-x/l_+\right) + iG_3 \exp \left(-x/l_-\right) \quad (18)$$

where $l_+^{-1} = \sqrt{\frac{1}{\lambda_{sf}^2} \pm \frac{1}{\lambda_J^2}}$. To determine the constants of integration, we assume the thick magnetic layer F2 is half metallic so that the current is fully spin polarized and we demand that the spin current is continuous across $F2/N/F1$ interface \[15\]; we find

$$\beta j_e - 2D_0(1 - \beta \beta') \left(-\frac{G_1}{\lambda_{sdl}}\right) = j_e \cos \theta, \quad (19)$$

$$- 2D_0 \left(\frac{G_2}{l_+} + \frac{G_3}{l_-}\right) = 0, \quad (20)$$

and

$$- 2D_0(-i) \left(-\frac{G_2}{l_+} + \frac{G_3}{l_-}\right) = -j_e \sin \theta. \quad (21)$$
Thus we determine the constants to be

\[ G_1 = -\frac{j e \lambda_{sd}(\beta - \cos \theta)}{2D_0(1 - \beta \beta')}, \]  

\( (22) \)

\[ G_2 = \frac{j e l_+ \sin \theta}{4iD_0}, \]  

\( (23) \)

and

\[ G_3 = -\frac{j e l_- \sin \theta}{4iD_0}. \]  

\( (24) \)

Therefore, we find the transverse spin accumulation

\[ m_\perp = -\left( \frac{j e}{2D_0} \right) \left[ \text{Im}(l_+ e^{-x/l_+}) M_d^{(2)} + \text{Re}(l_+ e^{-x/l_+}) M_d^{(2)} \times M_d^{(1)} \right] \times M_d^{(1)} \]  

\( (25) \)

where we have used \(-\sin \theta e_x = M_d^{(2)} \times M_d^{(1)}\) and \(\sin \theta e_y = (M_d^{(2)} \times M_d^{(1)}) \times M_d^{(1)}\). We immediately see that the form of the spin accumulation given above is precisely the form we used in deriving Eq. (15). To obtain the coefficients \(a\) and \(b\) entering Eq. (15) we average this spin accumulation over \(0 \leq x \leq t_F\) where \(t_F\) is the thickness of the F1 layer and find

\[ a = -\frac{JJ_e}{2D_0 t_F} \text{Im}[l_+^2(1 - e^{-t_F/l_+})], \]  

\( (26) \)

and

\[ b = \frac{JJ_e}{2D_0 t_F} \text{Re}[l_+^2(1 - e^{-t_F/l_+})], \]  

\( (27) \)

It is noted that both \(a\) and \(b\) change sign under time reversal. The former agrees with that found in [1–3]; while the latter has not been considered by these authors. To estimate \(a\) and \(b\), we take the limit \(\lambda_{sf} \gg \lambda_J\) in which case \(l_+ = (1 + i)\lambda_J/\sqrt{2}\). By placing this into Eqs. (26) and (27), we find

\[ a = -\frac{\hbar J e a_0^3}{\sqrt{2}e\mu_B \lambda_J} \left( 1 - \cos \xi e^{-\xi} \right) \left( \frac{1 - \cos \xi e^{-\xi}}{\xi} \right) \]  

\( (28) \)

and

\[ b = \frac{\hbar J e a_0^3}{\sqrt{2}e\mu_B \lambda_J} \left( \sin \xi e^{-\xi} \right) \left( \frac{\sin \xi e^{-\xi}}{\xi} \right) \]  

\( (29) \)
where $\xi = t_F/(\sqrt{2}\lambda_J)$, $a_0$ is the lattice constant, and we have reinserted the electric charge and Bohr magneton so that $a$ and $b$ have units of a magnetic field. If we take $\lambda_J = 20 \, \text{Å}$, $a_0 = 2 \, \text{Å}$, $j_e = 10^{11} \, \text{A/m}^2$, we find $a = -1056 \, (\text{Oe})$ and $b = 457 \, (\text{Oe})$ for a typical experiment with $t_F = 25 \, \text{Å}$.

In conclusion we have found that by considering the exchange forces between the conduction electron spin and the background magnetization for the spin current perpendicular to the layers of a magnetic multilayer there exists the effective field and torque, both of which contribute to current driven reversal of the magnetization. We treat both terms on an equal footing and demonstrate that they have a common origin. Our solution differs in two important aspects from previous work: we find the longitudinal spin accumulation does not play a role in the switching, and the spin torque, as well as the effective field, arises from a region in the magnetic layer within $\sim \lambda_J$ of the interface. Therefore, the decay length in our theory is related neither to the phase of the wavefunction, nor to the spin diffusion length as in the effective field concept of switching. We would like to acknowledge our very fruitful conversations with Yaroslav Bazaliy, Piet Brouwer, Carsten Heide, Henri Jaffres, Barbara Jones, Roger Koch, Iouli Nazarov, Dan Ralph, Andrei Ruckenstei and John Slonczewski. Many of them took place this summer at the Aspen Center for Physics this summer and we gratefully acknowledge its hospitality. This work was supported by the National Science Foundation (DMR0076171), and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and Office of Naval Research (Grant No. N00014-96-1-1207 and Contract No. MDA972-99-C-0009).
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