Synthesis and Characterization of Thin Nanostructured Bismuth Doped Tin Oxide Films and Sensing Studies

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Abstract: The tin dioxide (SnO$_2$) films doped with bismuth by means of magnetron sputtering of semiconductor two-phase target and powder BiO$_2$ as source of Bi were produced. The effect of bismuth dope concentration variation on the microstructure, electrophysical and gas-sensing properties was investigated. It has been found, that films consist of crystalline rods with diameter of 21$\pm$2 nm and length of 120$\pm$10 nm. Bismuth doping provided decrease in signal timing drift of acetone sensor in analyzed probe. Sensitivity to acetone vapor of the sample derived from targets with 0.01% bismuth oxide concentration increase almost by 10 times (up to 850) in comparison with undoped film at 300$^\circ$C. Based on the obtained experimental data the mechanism of bismuth dope influence on electrical and gas-sensing properties of produced tin dioxide films was evaluated. Obtained results have shown capability the use of bismuth doped dioxide tin films for development of saturated acetone vapor sensors.

Keywords: Tin dioxide, bismuth doping, gas-sensor, films morphology, saturated acetone vapors

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1. Introduction
Tin dioxide (SnO$_2$) is one of the most promising semiconducting materials for production of sensory layers of gas sensors. However, this material contains a large quantity of intrinsic defects of crystal lattice resulting in irreversible changes in its properties at extreme temperature variations. Furthermore, sensing film of pure SnO$_2$ has low sensibility and weak selectivity to variety of gases. Therefore pure SnO$_2$ slightly using in sensors production [1, 2]. Catalytic electroactive dopants as In, Pd, Ni, Er, Zn are used for correction of pure SnO$_2$ physicochemical properties, particularly, for intrinsic defects compensation, structure strengthening, selectivity and sensibility improvement [3-7]. Tin dioxide thin films doping provides significant modification their microstructure and electronic structure changing crystallites growth mechanisms and parameters, producing additional donor and acceptor states hence changing material conductance. As well SnO$_2$ doping with various additives Pt, Pd, Au is able to change material lattice constant. [8-11].

There are a lot of papers devoted to investigation of influence of various dopants to SnO$_2$ film on the gas sensor parameters. Deposition of Pd nanoparticles on the SnO$_2$ film surface results in sensor operation temperature reducing down to room temperature [12]. SnO$_2$ doped with cerium showed an increase in the sensor sensitivity to hydrogen sulfide [13, 14] and various organic gases [15]. Cobalt, ruthenium, nickel or iron doping significantly increases tin dioxide sensitivity to methane, trimethylamine, and ethanol, respectively [16-19]. The use of SnO$_2$ films doped with zirconium leads to decrease in the sensor operating temperature and increase of the maximum sensitivity to ethanol, acetone, and isopropyl alcohol vapor [20]. It is known that introduction of Cu dopant into SnO$_2$ film leads to decrease the drift of the sensor baseline while the material selectivity to H$_2$S increases comparing with CO and C$_2$H$_5$OH [21-24]. In [25] it has been shown that donor-like sites created during the deposition of SnO$_2$-Cu film provide much better sensor stability than intrinsic donors in pure SnO$_2$ films. The effect can be explained by a decrease in the mobility of oxygen vacancies when coupled with Cu atoms vacancies. It has been supposed that in the case of bismuth doping it is possible to realize such mechanism. However, due to the much larger ionic radius of Bi (1.03Å) than that of tin (0.69Å), when the complex is formed with an oxygen vacancy, the compound will create a greater strain in the crystal structure. This will lead to a more effective inhibition of migration of oxygen vacancies and, consequently, to greater stability of the gas sensor.

In earlier it was shown that Bi doping changed the structural and phase characteristics of SnO$_2$ films [26, 27]. Usually, bismuth oxide powder is used as a target to produce films doped with bismuth. Introduction of bismuth oxide permit to control crystallite size in a wide range. The increasing bismuth oxide concentration from 0 to 20 mol.% leads to average crystallite size decreases in twice. It has been also shown possibility to create a resistive sensor based on bismuth oxide branched SnO$_2$ nanowires with selectively sensitivity to NO$_2$ [28]. However, there is practically no research of Bi effect on SnO$_2$ film morphology. As well the review of the literature has been shown that the study of the possibility of using SnO$_2$ films doped with bismuth as sensory coatings for acetone sensor is small compared with other dopants. In this regard, we studied nanostructured thin films of SnO$_2$ doped with bismuth and their sensitivity to acetone vapors.
2. EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

2.1. Semiconductor film sample producing

The tin dioxide thin films under study were prepared using the method of high-frequency magnetron sputtering of a dielectric target by means a set up Orion-40T VTC-PVD-600 (South Korea). The circle targets with bare SnO$_2$ powder and with mixed SnO$_2$ and BiO$_2$ powders were obtained by dry pressing. Five targets were prepared: pure tin dioxide, and tin dioxide with BiO$_2$ additives with concentration of 0.01, 0.1, 1, and 10 mass.%. The diameter and the thickness of the targets were equal to 100 mm and 4 mm, respectively. Sputtering was carried out in an argon atmosphere with the addition of oxygen in a flow ratio of 3:1, respectively. Polished polycrystalline plates and monocrystalline silicon wafers were used as substrates. After sputtering, a metal contact system was deposited over the tin dioxide film by using thermal evaporation method. This contact system is consisted of two parallel strips 10 mm long with a gap between them of 0.1 mm.

2.2. Composition, structure and morphology study

The film morphology was estimated using the method of SEM-imaging of the cleaved film with a scanning electron microscope Mira II LMU (Tescan, Czech). The average grain size was estimated using the Gwyddion imaging software. Surface composition analysis and dopant thickness distribution was carried out by means of a scanning Auger electron spectroscopy and a secondary ion mass spectrometry with ion beam etching (Physical Electronics, PHI-4300, USA). Crystal structure was evaluated using a Xcalibur/Gemini A single crystal X-ray diffractometer (Oxford Diffraction, Poland, 2010). Also Raman spectra were analyzed using a highly sensitive confocal scanning Raman microscope (NTMDT, Zelenograd).

2.3. Gas-sensitivity study

The study of the response to acetone vapors and the long-term stability of the sensors were automatically performed using a measuring and computing system. System management was developed by means of a LabView environment. Test gas mixture was obtained using EL-FLOW flowmeters (Bronkhorst, Netherlands), that ensured measurement accuracy of ±1% of the full scale with a measurement time of less than 200 ms. Measurements were performed in a dry air flow with the rate of 100 ml/min. The sensor temperature was controlled using an “Erbium” temperature regulator. The sensor conductivity was measured by means a Keithley 2000-20 multipurpose tester. Schematic representation of a sensing element (a), photo of a holder for sensing element (b) and image of a measuring chamber (c) are presented in Fig. 1. The measuring chamber was a hollow aluminum (D16T) cylinder with an inner diameter of 18 mm and a height of 28 mm. The volume of the measuring chamber taking into account the volume displaced by the microthermostat and the sample was 5 cm$^3$. Stagnant zones in the chamber were absent due to the special arrangement of the inlet and outlet fitting.

The characteristic purge time of the measuring chamber can be estimated by the formula:

![Fig. 1. Schematic representation of a sensing element (a), photo of a holder for sensing element (b) and image of a measuring chamber (c).](image-url)
\[ c(t) = (c_0 - c_{in})e^{-\frac{F}{V}t} + c_{in}, \]

where \( c(t) \) is the dependence of the concentration of impurities in the measuring chamber on time, \( c_0 \) is the initial concentration of impurities in the chamber, \( c_{in} \) is the impurity concentration in the gas entering the chamber, \( F \) is gas flow through the chamber, \( V \) is chamber volume. At a gas flow rate of 100 nml/min the typical purge time \( \tau = V/F \) is less than 3s.

An admixture of acetone vapor was obtained by mixing saturated acetone vapor (370000 ppm at 25°C) with a stream of dry air in a ratio of 5/95 ml/min. The concentration of the acetone sample was 18500 ppm. Acetone vapors were obtained by sparging dry air through acetone. This method is common for obtaining impurities of substances that are in a liquid state at room temperature and have high volatility. The bubbler was a 1.5 liter glass container. The immersion depth of the sprayer and the air volume above water were 12 cm and 184 cm³, respectively. The temperature of the acetone in the bubbler was kept constant at room temperature 25ºC.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Scanning electron microscopy.
An analysis of experimental films micrographs showed no dependence of films deposition rate on BiO₂ concentration in the target. The morphology of the all obtained films was similar one presented in Fig. 2.

The micrograph shows that the film consists of vertically oriented grains. The average grain size was calculated by statistical analysis of the obtained micrographs and was 21±2 nm for all samples. The film thickness was 120±10 nm. We decided to partially omit the energy dispersive analysis due to the small films thickness, comparable with the depth of signal generation, since small concentrations of bismuth cannot be identified against the background of the strong influence of a single-crystal silicon substrate. However, the content of tin and oxygen amounts about 30 mol.% and 70 mol.% respectively. The elements content corresponds to SnO₂ stoichiometric ratio. A slight excess of oxygen may be attributed to the presence of silicon oxide on the substrate surface.

3.2. Auger-spectroscopy
The chemical composition data of the surface obtained by the Auger electron spectroscopy method (AESM) is presented in Table 1. For comparison the data of Bi were also calculated by using molar ratio. The obtained results are also presented in Table 1. The content of target elements is converted from mass to atomic percentage for convenience. At BiO₂ concentration in the target value of 0.0063 at.% AESM did not reveal the presence of a dopant on the thin film surface. The Table 1 analysis has shown that the increase of concentration of BiO₂ in the target leads to decreasing the difference between concentration of Bi obtained by means molar ratio calculation and defined by AESM. It is expected that such trend related with the characteristics of films growth. The tin dioxide structure "expels" foreign atoms to the surface when concentration of the dopant element is low. Increase in the bismuth dioxide content in the target leads to deactivation of this mechanism, and the concentrations become the same.

| Sample content |
|----------------|
| Target composition | Sn, at.% | O, at.% | Bi, at% |
| SnO₂, at%/maсс.% | BiO₂, at%/maсс.% | Molar calculation/AESM |
| 100/100 | 0/0 | 48.59 | 51.41 | 0 | 0.021/0.32 |
| 99.937/99.99 | 0.0063/0.01 | 49.88 | 50.12 | 0 | 0.21/1.76 |
| 99.937/99.99 | 0.063/0.1 | 48.67 | 51 | 0.021/0.32 |
| 99.37/99 | 0.63/1 | 47.44 | 50.8 | 0.21/1.76 |
| 93.7/90 | 6.3/10 | 46.73 | 46.96 | 2.1/6.3 |
3.3. Secondary Ion Mass Spectrometry

The approximated distribution profiles of the Bi dopant over the volume of a thin film are presented in Fig. 3. Results of the distribution of the dopant over the film volume evaluation are similar with Auger spectroscopy data. The signal strength at the start of sputtering is proportional to the bismuth concentration value figured out using Auger spectroscopy. For example, the signal level in a film with a bismuth concentration of 0.32 at.% corresponds to 120 arb. units, and concentration of 6.3 at.% - 2500 arb. units. In this way 6.3/0.32 ≈ 2500/120 ≈ 20.

The decrease in the dopant content from sputtering time may be the result of decrease in the sputtering coefficient (dislodging of the surface atoms are more probable) either of decrease in the elements concentration. The latter, apparently, is driven by the crystal growth peculiarities, i.e. with the displacement of foreign impurities from the film structure.

3.4. Raman Scattering Spectroscopy

The Raman spectra of SnO\(_2\) films doped with Bi at different BiO\(_2\) concentrations in the target material is presented in Fig. 4. The peaks of silicon substrate significantly affect on the spectrum shape, due to the small thickness of the films. Therefore the figure demonstrates only a part of the spectrum.

There are no spectral peaks in the region of the Sn–O phase oscillation of tin oxide (approximately 211 cm\(^{-1}\) [29]). Small peaks are observed at wave numbers of 148 cm\(^{-1}\), 237 cm\(^{-1}\), and 245 cm\(^{-1}\), that can be explained by the presence of nonstoichiometric tin dioxide phases, such as Sn\(_2\)O\(_3\) and Sn\(_3\)O\(_4\) [30-32]. Peaks in the interval of 615-640 cm\(^{-1}\) indicates the presence of the SnO\(_2\) phase. According to [33] the peak location on the Raman spectrum near the 620 cm\(^{-1}\) depends on SnO\(_2\) phase size. For bulk material, it is located at 632 cm\(^{-1}\), while nanoparticles with dimensions of 7 nm and 25 nm have peaks at 621 cm\(^{-1}\) and 625 cm\(^{-1}\), respectively. As can be seen in Fig. 3 all samples have pronounced peaks at 623 cm\(^{-1}\), that indicates the presence of SnO\(_2\) phase with an average size of nanoparticles approximately of 20 nm. This is coincided with the data obtained using an electron microscope. The Raman spectra of thick Bi films doped with SnO\(_2\) nanoparticles were investigated in [34]. There was a peak at 660 cm\(^{-1}\) indicating bismuth concentration of ~3 mol.%, the value of which decreased with a decrease in bismuth concentration to 1 mol.%. Based on this facts, it is expected that the peaks at 670 cm\(^{-1}\) for samples with a content of BiO\(_2\) 0.1 wt.% and 1 wt.%, and 685 cm\(^{-1}\) for a sample with a content of 10 wt.% are probably associated with an increase in bismuth and its derivatives concentration in the film structure.
3.5. X-RAY DIFFRACTION
The X-ray patterns of the investigated SnO$_2$ films with different concentrations of BiO$_2$ in the target are shown in Fig. 5. The peaks on the radiographs of the films correspond to cassiterite form of SnO$_2$. The graphs are demonstrated a broadening and a slight shift of the diffraction reflections characteristic of SnO$_2$ with an increase in the mass content of BiO$_2$ in the target. On the one hand, bismuth introduction into the composition of the SnO$_2$ film can lead to an increase in the lattice constant due to the larger ionic radius compared to tin [35]. On the other hand, bismuth introduction can lead to an increase in the intrinsic defects concentration (oxygen vacancies) and a decrease in the lattice constant. For that matter, it is impossible to make firm conclusion about the inclusion of bismuth atoms in tin dioxide structure. The decrease in height and the broadening of diffraction reflections probably related with disturbance of the crystal structure of the material. Separate peaks corresponding to bismuth compounds were not detected.

3.6. INVESTIGATION OF ELECTRICAL PROPERTIES OF PRODUCED FILMS
As is known, tin dioxide is a nonstoichiometric n-type semiconductor, in which oxygen vacancies are donor centers [32]. The diffusion of oxygen vacancies from the volume of polycrystalline samples onto the surface is activated at elevated temperatures. Oxygen vacancies associate with adsorbed oxygen on the surface of tin dioxide and lose its donor characteristics. Therefore a long-term change in the conductivity of the samples is observed at elevated temperatures.

The investigated samples conductivity drift was estimated at working temperature of 300°C in an atmosphere of dry air within 24 hours using an automated measuring system. The dynamics of changes in the conductivity of samples with various concentration of BiO$_2$ in the target are presented in Fig. 6. As it is seen in Fig. 6 introduction of bismuth dopant leads to a non-monotonic change in the samples conductivity in air. Initially conductivity is sharply increased then decreased and after some time to achieve a stationary value.

The drift value of samples conductivity was determined to estimate the long-term stability of the samples conductivity at elevated temperatures in air:

$$v_d = \frac{1}{\Delta t} \frac{G_4 - G_{24}}{G_4} \times 100\%,$$

where $\Delta t = 20h$ is the observation time of the change in the samples conductivity, $G_4$ and $G_{24}$.
are the conductivity values of samples after 4 hours and 24 hours after heating to a temperature of 300°C, respectively.

The results of the conductivity drift calculation are presented in Fig. 7. The lowest level of baseline drift was observed at the sample obtained by using a target with a BiO₂ content of 1 wt.%. It may be concluded that bismuth dopant introduction ambiguously affects the long-term stability of tin dioxide films conductivity. For samples obtained from a target with 1 wt.% BiO₂ concentration, the resistance drift decreased by a factor of 2 relative to the undoped sample. Apparently, the introduction of BiO₂ in amounts of less than 1 wt.% results in the originate of additional defects in the polycrystalline samples volume and an increase in conductivity drift value. A decrease in the long-term drift of conductivity when the concentration of BiO₂ in the target is 1 mass% may be due to the association of defects (oxygen vacancies) in a polycrystalline sample of tin dioxide and bismuth atoms. At the same time, the forming associative complexes (oxygen vacancies and bismuth dopant atoms) have a higher diffusion activation energy, which provides a decrease in the samples conductivity drift. Use of 10 mass% BiO₂ target in the doping of SnO₂ possibly leads to the formation of a polycrystalline composite material tin dioxide/bismuth oxide. In such samples, the long-term conductivity drift at elevated temperatures may be associated with the oxygen vacancies diffusion in grains of the tin dioxide phase, as well as with the processes of interphase diffusion of defects and dopant atoms along the grain boundaries.

The graph of the conductivity temperature dependence of SnO₂ samples is presented in Fig. 8. The temperature increase from 200°C to 350°C leads to samples conductivity increase, which indicates an activation mechanism for the conductivity change. Upon further heating, conductivity maximum is observed in the range of 370–420°C, and then a decrease in conductivity occurred (except for the sample obtained from 1 mass% and 10 mass% BiO₂ concentration target). Hysteresis in the temperature dependences of the samples conductivity is also observed, i.e. the heating curves pass below the cooling curves. The hysteresis value is different for various samples, and the sample obtained from a target with 0.1 mass% BiO₂ content in the target has a minimum hysteresis value.

The maximum in the temperature dependence of the SnO₂ samples conductivity is related to the adsorbed oxygen conversion from O₂ to O⁻ and O²-. At operating temperatures of ~ 400°C, molecular oxygen in a neutral form adsorbed on the surface dissociates into atomic oxygen subsequently...
capturing charge carriers (electrons) from the bulk of the grain. As a consequence, the samples conductivity decreases and a maximum of the temperature dependence of the conductivity is observed. It should be noted that the increase of BiO$_2$ concentration in the target of more than 1 wt.% results in disappearing of the maximum in the conductivity temperature dependence or in its shifting to the temperature range above 450°C. It can be assumed that the bismuth doping of the tin dioxide surface increases the dissociation energy of molecular oxygen adsorbed on its surface. In addition, the concentration of BiO$_2$ in the target of 0.1 wt.% and higher leads to a decrease in the tin dioxide samples conductivity, which can be ascribed to increase in the ionization degree of adsorbed oxygen due to the electron transfer from bismuth atoms to adsorbed oxygen atoms.

3.7. Investigation of gas-sensing properties of produced films

The time dependences of the films conductivity were obtained to analyze the effect of bismuth oxide concentration on the film response rate to acetone vapors in air. As an example, the dependence of the pure tin dioxide film conductivity on the exposure time of acetone vapor in air is presented in Fig. 9. The dependence indicates that the sample conductivity increased when the gas is introduced into the measuring chamber, and decreased when purging with purified air. Multiple repetition of the experiment shows that the conductivity of the film changes reversibly and reproduces with introduction of the analyzed samples. The response time ($t_{\text{res}}$) was about 7s. The recovery time ($t_{\text{rec}}$) significantly exceeded the response time and amounted to about 280s probably due to the high concentration of acetone vapor in the gas sample.

In the air, oxygen molecules adsorbing on the surface of tin dioxide capture electrons from the volume and charge negatively. Acetone molecules interact with ionized oxygen molecules and the products of the chemical interaction of acetone and oxygen are desorbed into the gas phase. Then electrons captured by adsorbed oxygen return to the bulk tin dioxide and the samples conductivity increases.

Fig. 10 presents the dependence of the response rate of tin dioxide samples formed from targets with different bismuth oxide concentration.
The gas response \( S \) to gas samples exposure was evaluated as the ratio of conductivity in a gas sample \( G_g \) to conductivity in air \( G_a \): \[ S = \frac{G_g}{G_a}. \] (3)

The highest response rate, equal to 850, was observed in samples with BiO\(_2\) concentration in the target of 0.01 wt.% while samples with a concentration of 1% had the smallest response. A decrease in the response of samples with a BiO\(_2\) content in the target of more than 0.1 wt.% can be attributed to the fact that amounts of the adsorbed oxygen is smaller on the tin dioxide surface in comparison with the surface of undoped samples. This fact is indicated by thermocycling data (Fig. 8). For that matter, when the gas samples are exposed, the amount of reacting oxygen with acetone molecules on the surface is less than in the case of low-alloyed and undoped samples.

Table 2 presents data on the response to high concentration of acetone for sensors based on pure SnO\(_2\) and SnO\(_2\) doped with various dopants. The data analysis shows that bismuth-doped tin dioxide films have good sensitivity and stability for development of acetone sensors.

4. CONCLUSION
The effect of various concentrations of bismuth dopant on the morphology, chemical composition and structure of tin dioxide films was studied. Peculiarities of the dopant distribution over the experimental film thickness were identified. It was found out, that the films composed of crystalline rods directed transversely to the substrate surface, with diameter and length of 20-21 nm and 120±10 nm, respectively. It was demonstrated, that the sensitivity to saturated acetone vapors increases by almost 10 times (up to 850) for a sample formed from a target with a bismuth oxide concentration of 0.01%, compared to an undoped film. Baseline drift of the most sensitive samples increased from 0.47%/hour for the undoped sample to 1.24%/hour for the doped sample. This fact indicates the necessity for annealing of the doped samples after obtaining, in order to relieve mechanical stresses in the growing structure.

In general, evaluated data shows prospects of bismuth-doped tin dioxide films usage for producing the saturated acetone vapor sensors.
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