Current Noise in ac-Driven Nanoscale Conductors

Sébastien Camalet, Jörg Lehmann, Sigmund Kohler, and Peter Hänggi
Institut für Physik, Universität Augsburg, Universitätstraße 1, D-86135 Augsburg, Germany
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The theory for current fluctuations in ac-driven transport through nanoscale systems is put forward. By use of a generalized, non-Hermitian Floquet theory we derive novel explicit expressions for the time-averaged current and the zero-frequency component of the power spectrum of current fluctuations. A distinct suppression of both the zero-frequency noise and the dc-current occurs for suitably tailored ac-fields. The relative level of transport noise, being characterized by a Fano factor, can selectively be manipulated by ac-sources; in particular, it exhibits both characteristic maxima and minima near current suppression.

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Recent experimental successes in the coherent coupling of quantum dots [1] and in the reproducible measurement of electronic currents through molecules [2, 3] have given rise to renewed theoretical interest in the transport properties of nanoscale systems [4, 5]. Thereby, new ideas in order to exploit the quantum coherence of such systems for the construction of novel electronic devices [6] have emerged. One possible construction element is based on the manipulation of quantum dots or single molecules by use of an oscillating gate voltage or an infrared laser, respectively. A prominent effect of such ac-fields consists in the adiabatic [6, 7, 8, 9] and nonadiabatic [10, 11] pumping of electrons. Moreover, laser irradiated molecular wires provide novel devices such as coherent quantum rectifiers [12] and optically controlled transistors [13]. However, such time-dependent control schemes can be valuable in practice only if they operate at tolerable noise levels. Thus, the question whether noise properties of nanoscale systems can be selectively manipulated becomes of foremost interest.

Electron transport through time-independent, mesoscopic systems is commonly described within the framework of a scattering formalism. Both the average current [14] and the transport noise characteristics [15] can be expressed in terms of the quantum transmission coefficients for the corresponding transport channels. By contrast, the theory for driven quantum transport is much less developed. Expressions for the spectral density of the current fluctuations have been derived for the low-frequency ac-conductance [17] and the scattering by a slowly time-dependent potential [18]. However, the situation becomes more opaque in the presence of rapidly varying time-dependent fields. Within a Green function approach, a formal expression for the current through a time-dependent conductor has been presented in Refs. [14, 21]. Here, we derive explicit expressions for both the current and the noise properties of electron transport through a nanoscale conductor under the influence of time-dependent forces at arbitrary frequency and strength. The dynamics of the electrons is solved by integrating the Heisenberg equations of motion for the electron creation/annihilation operators within a generalized Floquet approach. We then use the resulting expressions to explore the possibility of an a priori control of the dc-current and the zero-frequency noise by the influence of an ac-field.

The lead-wire model.—The entire setup of our nanoscale system is described by the time-dependent Hamiltonian \( H(t) = H_{\text{wire}}(t) + H_{\text{leads}} + H_{\text{contacts}} \), where the different terms correspond to the driven wire (or coupled quantum dots), the leads, and the wire-lead coupling, respectively. In order to go beyond merely formal considerations, we herewith focus on the regime of coherent quantum transport where the main physics at work occurs on the wire itself. In doing so, we neglect other possible influences stemming from driving induced hot electrons in the leads, dissipation on the wire and, as well, electron-electron interaction effects. Then, the wire Hamiltonian reads in a tight-binding approximation with \( N \) orbitals \( |n⟩ \)

\[
H_{\text{wire}}(t) = \sum_{n,n'}(H_{nn'}(t)c_{n'}^\dagger c_n). \tag{1}
\]

The fermion operators \( c_n, c_n^\dagger \) annihilate and create, respectively, an electron in the orbital \( |n⟩ \). The influence of an applied ac-field with frequency \( \Omega = 2\pi/T \)
results in a periodic time-dependence of the Hamiltonian: \( H_{nn'}(t+T) = H_{nn'}(t) \). The leads are modeled by ideal electron gases, \( H_{\text{leads}} = \sum_q \epsilon_q (c_{Lq}^\dagger c_{Lq} + c_{Rq}^\dagger c_{Rq}) \), where \( c_{Lq}^\dagger (c_{Rq}^\dagger) \) creates an electron in the state \( |Lq⟩ (|Rq⟩) \) in the left (right) lead. The tunneling Hamiltonian

\[
H_{\text{contacts}} = \sum_q \left( V_{Lq}c_{Lq}^\dagger c_1 + V_{Rq}c_{Rq}^\dagger c_N \right) + \text{h.c.} \tag{2}
\]

establishes the contact between the sites \( |1⟩, |N⟩ \) and the respective lead, as sketched in Fig. 1. Below, we shall assume within a so-called wide-band limit that the coupling strengths \( \Gamma_\ell = 2\pi \sum_q|V_{\ell q}|^2\delta(\epsilon - \epsilon_q) \), \( \ell = L, R \), are energy independent. To specify fully the dynamics, we choose as an initial condition for the left/right lead a grand-canonical electron ensemble at temperature \( T \) and...
electro-chemical potential $\mu_{L/R}$, respectively. An applied voltage $V$ maps to a chemical potential difference $\mu_R - \mu_L = eV$, where $-e$ is the electron charge.

We shall focus on two central transport quantities: the time-dependent electrical currents through the two contacts and their fluctuations. The current operators are given by the negative time variation of the electron numbers in the leads, multiplied by the electron charge $-e$, $I_{L}(t) = i\varepsilon [H(t), N_{L}] / \hbar$, where $N_{L} = \sum_q c_{1q}^\dagger c_{1q}$ denotes the electron number in lead $L$.

**Generalized Floquet approach.**—For the evaluation of correlation functions, we work in the Heisenberg picture and derive the annihilation operators at long times by a Floquet ansatz $|21\rangle$. From the Hamiltonian $H(t)$ follow the Heisenberg equations for the lead operators, with the wire operators appearing in an inhomogeneity. In an integrated form they read

$$c_{Lq}(t) = c_{Lq}(t_0) e^{-ie\alpha(t-t_0)/\hbar} - \frac{iVe_{\alpha}}{\hbar} \int_{t_0}^{t} e^{-ie\alpha\tau/\hbar} c_1(t-\tau)$$

and $c_{Rq}(t)$ accordingly. Inserting this into the Heisenberg equations for the wire operators yields

$$\dot{c}_1/N = -\frac{i}{\hbar} \sum_{n'} H_{1/N,n'}(t) c_{n'} - \frac{\Gamma_{L/R}}{2\hbar} c_{1/N} + \xi_{L/R}(t),
$$

$$\dot{c}_n = -\frac{i}{\hbar} \sum_{n'} H_{n,n'}(t) c_{n'}, \quad n = 2, \ldots, N - 1.$$  

(3)

Owing to the wide-band limit, the dissipative terms are memory free. Within the chosen grand canonical ensembles the operator-valued Gaussian noise $\xi_{L}(t) = -(i/\hbar) \sum_q V_{eq}^* e^{-ie\alpha(t-t_0)/\hbar} c_{eq}(t_0)$ obeys

$$\langle \xi_{L}(t) \rangle = 0,$$

$$\langle \xi_{L}^\dagger(t) \xi_{L'}(t') \rangle = \delta_{L'} \frac{\Gamma_{L}}{2\pi\hbar^2} \int d\epsilon e^{i\epsilon(t-t')/\hbar} f_{\epsilon}$$

where $f_{\epsilon} = (1 + \exp[(\epsilon - \mu_{L})/k_{B}T])^{-1}$ denotes the Fermi function at temperature $T$ and chemical potential $\mu_{L, L} = L, R$. The current operator then assumes the form

$$I_{L}(t) = \frac{e}{\hbar} \Gamma_{L} c_{1}^\dagger(t) c_{1}(t) - e\{ c_{1}^\dagger(t) \xi_{L}(t) + \xi_{L}^\dagger(t) c_{1}(t) \}.$$  

(6)

Before solving the inhomogeneous set of equations $|3\rangle$, let us first analyze the corresponding homogeneous equations. They are linear and possess time-dependent, $T$-periodic coefficients. Thus, it is possible to construct a complete solution with the help of the Floquet ansatz $|\psi(t)\rangle = \exp(-i\epsilon_{\alpha}/\hbar - \gamma_{\alpha} t)|u_{\alpha}(t)\rangle$. The Floquet states $|u_{\alpha}(t)\rangle = \sum_{k} |u_{\alpha k}\rangle \exp(-i\epsilon_{\alpha}kT)$ obey the time-periodicity of the differential equations and fulfill in a Hilbert space that is extended by a periodic coordinate the eigenvalue equation

$$\left( H(t) - i\Sigma - i\hbar \frac{d}{dt} \right) |u_{\alpha}(t)\rangle = (\epsilon_{\alpha} - i\hbar\gamma_{\alpha}) |u_{\alpha}(t)\rangle,$$

where $H(t) = \sum_{n,n'} |n\rangle H_{n,n'}(t)\langle n'|$ and $2\Sigma = |1\rangle \Gamma_{L}\langle 1| + |N\rangle \Gamma_{R}\langle N|$. Because the eigenvalue equation $|3\rangle$ is non-Hermitian, its eigenvalues $\epsilon_{\alpha} - i\hbar\gamma_{\alpha}$ are generally complex valued and the (right) eigenvectors are not mutually orthogonal. Therefore, we need to solve also the adjoint Floquet equation yielding again the same eigenvalues but providing the adjoint eigenvectors $|u_{\alpha}^\dagger(t)\rangle$. It can be shown that the Floquet states $|u_{\alpha}(t)\rangle$ together with the adjoint states $|u_{\alpha}^\dagger(t)\rangle$ form at equal times a complete bi-orthogonal basis: $\langle u_{\alpha}^\dagger(t) | u_{\alpha}(t') \rangle = \delta_{\alpha\beta}$ and $\sum_{\alpha} \langle u_{\alpha}(t) | u_{\alpha}(t') \rangle = 1$. For $\Gamma_{L/R} = 0$, both $|u_{\alpha}(t)\rangle$ and $|u_{\alpha}^\dagger(t)\rangle$ reduce to the usual Floquet states.

The Floquet states $|u_{\alpha}(t)\rangle$ allow to write the general solution of Eq. $|3\rangle$ in closed form. In the asymptotic limit $t_{0} \rightarrow -\infty$, it reads

$$c_{n}(t) = \sum_{\alpha} \int_{0}^{\infty} d\tau \langle n | u_{\alpha}(t) \rangle e^{(-ie\alpha/h - \gamma_{\alpha}\tau)} (u_{\alpha}^\dagger(t - \tau)) \times \{ |1\rangle \xi_{L}(t - \tau) + |N\rangle \xi_{R}(t - \tau) \}.$$  

(8)

To obtain the current ($I_{L}(t)$), we insert the operator $|8\rangle$ into Eq. $|3\rangle$ and use the expectation values $|3\rangle$. We then find that the current assumes the commonly expected “scattering form” $|4\rangle$ but with time-dependent transmission probabilities and, as well, an additional contribution that accounts for a $T$-periodic charging of the wire. The latter does not contribute to the time-averaged current $\bar{I} = \int_{0}^{T} dt \langle I_{L}(t) \rangle / T$ so that we obtain as a first result

$$\bar{I} = \frac{e}{2\pi\hbar} \sum_{k} \int d\epsilon \left\{ T_{L,R}^{(k)}(\epsilon) f_{R}(\epsilon) - T_{R,L}^{(k)}(\epsilon) f_{L}(\epsilon) \right\}.$$  

(9)

Owing to charge conservation it equals the average current through the right contact. The coefficients

$$T_{L,R}^{(k)}(\epsilon) = \Gamma_{L,R} |\langle 1| G_{1,1}(\epsilon) \rangle|^{2}$$

(10)

can be interpreted as the probability that an electron with energy $\epsilon$ is transmitted from the right lead to the
left lead under the absorption of $k$ photons, respectively the emission of $-k$ photons when $k < 0$. Note that the sum runs over all integers $k$ corresponding to different conduction channels that contribute independently to the average current $\bar{I}$. The retarded Green function

$$G_{nn'}^{(k)}(\epsilon) = \sum_{\alpha,k,k'} \frac{\langle n|u_{\alpha,k} \rangle \langle n'|u_{\alpha,k'}^+ \rangle}{\epsilon - (\epsilon_{\alpha} + k\hbar\Omega - i\hbar\gamma_{\alpha})}$$

(11)

describes the propagation of an electron from orbital $|n'\rangle$ to orbital $|n\rangle$. We emphasize that generally $|G_{1N}^{(k)}(\epsilon)| \neq |G_{N1}^{(k)}(\epsilon)|$ for a driven system. An expression for the time averaged current similar to Eq. (9) has been proposed in Ref. [19] without providing an explicit form for the Green function in terms of generalized Floquet states.

Next, we address the main topic of this work, namely the current noise given by the auto-correlation function $S_I(t,\tau) = \frac{1}{2}\langle [\Delta I_L(t), \Delta I_L(t+\tau)]_+ \rangle$ of the current fluctuation operator $\Delta I_L(t) = I_L(t) - \langle I_L(t) \rangle$. It can be shown that $S_I(t,\tau) = S_L(t + T,\tau)$ shares the time-periodicity of the driving. Therefore, it is possible to characterize the noise level by the time-averaged noise power at zero frequency, $\bar{S}_I = \int dt f_L^2(t) S_I(t,\tau)/T$. Since the total charge is conserved, the zero-frequency noise is identical at both the left and the right contact, i.e. $\bar{S}_L = \bar{S}_R = \bar{S}$. After some extensive algebra we obtain our central result

$$\bar{S} = \frac{e^2}{2\pi\hbar} \Gamma_L \Gamma_R \sum_k \int dt \left\{ \Gamma_L \Gamma_R \left[ \sum_{k'} G_{N1}^{(k-k')} (\epsilon + k\hbar\Omega) G_{N1}^{(k')} (\epsilon)^* \right] f_I^2(\epsilon + k\hbar\Omega) \right. \right.$$  

$$+ \left. \left[ G_{1N}^{(k-k')} (\epsilon + k\hbar\Omega) + i\Gamma_L \sum_{k'} G_{1N}^{(k-k')} (\epsilon + k\hbar\Omega) G_{11}^{(k')} (\epsilon)^* \right] f_I(\epsilon + k\hbar\Omega) \right\}$$

(12)

where we have defined $f_{L,R} = 1 - f_{L,R}$. The key results [1] and [2] contain as special cases prior findings: In the absence of any driving, the Floquet eigenvalues $\epsilon_{\alpha} - N\hbar\gamma_{\alpha}$ reduce to the complex-valued eigenenergies; this implies $G_{nn'}^{(k)} = 0$ for all $k \neq 0$, yielding the transmission probability for an electron with energy $E$ of $T(E) = \Gamma_L \Gamma_R |G_{N1}^{(0)}(E)|^2$. Thus, the quantities $\bar{I}$ and $\bar{S}$ agree with the well-known expressions obtained within the time-independent, non-driven scattering approach [3]. In the limit of a weak system–lead coupling but arbitrary driving strength, the average current [1] coincides also with the corresponding result of a recent master equation approach [2].

Current and noise suppression.—As a simple, yet non-trivial application, we consider a wire composed of $N$ orbitals as sketched in Fig. 1. Each orbital is coupled to its nearest neighbors by a hopping matrix element $\Delta$. The on-site energies are modulated by the influence of the ac-field, $H_{nn}(t) = E_n - A \cos(\Omega t)N + 1 - 2n)/2$, $n = 1,\ldots,N$. The energy $A$ equals the electric field strength multiplied by the electron charge $-e$ and the distance between two neighboring sites. The wire is assumed to couple equally to both leads, $\Gamma_L = \Gamma_R = \Gamma$, and the laser frequency is far off resonance, $\Omega = 5\Delta/\hbar$. For a molecular wire, a typical value for the hopping matrix element $\Delta$ and the coupling strength $\Gamma$ is 0.1 eV leading to a current unit $e\Gamma/\hbar \approx 25 \mu$A, while the laser frequency lies in the optical regime. For a distance of 2 Å between two neighboring sites, a driving amplitude $A = \Delta$ corresponds to an electric field strength of roughly $5 \times 10^6$ V/cm. For the evaluation of the current $\bar{I}$ and the noise $\bar{S}$, we restrict ourselves to zero temperature. Then, the Fermi functions turn into step functions and the energy integrals in Eqs. (9) and (12) can be carried out analytically. This limit is physically well justified for molecular wires at room temperature and for quantum dots at helium temperature since in both cases, thermal electron excitations do not play a significant role.

Figure 3a depicts the dc-current and the zero-frequency noise for a wire with $N = 3$ sites with equal on-site energies and a relatively large applied voltage. As a remarkable feature, we find that for certain values of the field amplitude $A$, the current drops to a value of some percent of the current in the absence of the field [3]. A perturbation theory for the Floquet equation (6) for $\Delta, \Gamma \ll \hbar\Omega$ yields that the driving results in a renormalized hopping matrix element $\Delta \rightarrow \Delta_{\text{eff}} = \Delta_0 (A/\hbar\Omega)$, where $\Delta_0$ denotes the zeroth-order Bessel function. Then, $G_{1N}$ and $G_{N1}$ vanish if the condition $J_0(A/\hbar\Omega) = 0$ is fulfilled [24]. Consequently, the dc-current (6) and the zero-frequency noise (12) also vanish.

The relative noise strength can be characterized by the so-called Fano factor $F = \bar{S}/e|\bar{I}|$ depicted in Fig. 3b. Interestingly enough, we find that the Fano factor exhibits as a function of the driving amplitude $A$ both a sharp maximum at current suppression and two pronounced minima nearby. For a sufficiently large voltage, the Fano factor assumes at the maximum the value $F \approx 1/2$. Once
the driving amplitude is of the order of the applied voltage, however, the Fano factor becomes much larger. The relative noise minima are distinct and provide a typical Fano factor of $F \approx 0.15$. Reducing the coupling to the leads renders these phenomena even more pronounced since then the suppressions occur in a smaller interval of the driving amplitude, cf. Fig. 2b. The overall behavior is robust in the sense that approximately the same values for the minima and the maximum are also found for larger wires, different driving frequencies, different coupling strengths, and slightly modified on-site energies, provided that $\Delta, \Gamma, E_n \ll h\Omega$ and that the applied voltage is sufficiently large. The qualitative behavior can again be understood within a perturbative approach. With increasing driving amplitude, a crossover from $\Delta_{\text{eff}} \gg \Gamma$ to $\Delta_{\text{eff}} \ll \Gamma$ at the current suppression occurs. Both limits correspond to the transport through a symmetric double barrier and, therefore, are characterized by $F \approx 1/2$ [13]. At the crossover $\Delta_{\text{eff}} \approx \Gamma$ the effective barriers vanish and, consequently, the Fano factor assumes its minimum.

In summary, we have put forward with Eqs. (9) and (12) new and appealing expressions for the time-averaged current and the zero-frequency noise for the electron transport through ac-driven nanoscale systems. A main finding is that in molecular wires and coherently coupled quantum dots, the influence of an ac-field can be used to selectively suppress both the current and its noise. Investigating the relative noise level characterized by the Fano factor has revealed that the current suppression is accompanied by a noise maximum and two remarkably low minima. These phenomena can be used to devise novel current sources with a priori controllable noise levels.

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