Two-Channel Kondo Effects in Al/AlO\textsubscript{x}/Sc Planar Tunnel Junctions

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(Dated: January 8, 2009)

We have measured the differential conductances \(G(V,T)\) in several Al/AlO\textsubscript{x}/Sc planar tunnel junctions between 2 and 35 K. As the temperature decreases to \(\sim 16\) K, the zero-bias conductance \(G(0,T)\) crosses over from a standard \(-\ln T\) dependence to a novel \(-\sqrt{T}\) dependence. Correspondingly, the finite bias conductance \(G(V,T)\) reveals a two-channel Kondo scaling behavior between \(4\) and \(16\) K. The observed two-channel Kondo physics is ascribed to originating from a few localized spin-\(\frac{1}{2}\) Sc atoms situated slightly inside the AlO\textsubscript{x}/Sc interface.

How conduction electrons interact with local degeneracies, which is the central theme of the Kondo effect [1], is a long-standing issue in many-body physics. In the original Kondo effect, the local degeneracies are provided by a spin-\(\frac{1}{2}\) impurity, antiferromagnetically coupled to a single reservoir of free electrons [the single-channel Kondo (1CK) effect]. Well below a characteristic energy, the Kondo temperature \(T_K\), the localized moment is fully screened by the surrounding itinerant electrons to form a singlet ground state, leading to a standard Fermi liquid behavior [1]. However, Nozières and Blandin [2] proposed that, in the multi-channel case, i.e., the screening channels \(M > 2S\), where \(S\) is the spin of the localized moment, a non-Fermi liquid behavior may occur at low temperatures. The simplest version of the multi-channel Kondo phenomena is the two-channel Kondo (2CK) effect \((M = 2)\) which has recently attracted much theoretical [3, 4, 5, 6] and experimental [7, 8, 9, 10] attention. Apart from a physical spin, the local degeneracies may arise from orbital quadrupolar degrees of freedom or nearby atomic positions, i.e., two-level systems (TLS) [3].

The magnetic and quadrupolar models have been utilized to explain the specific heat anomalies in certain heavy fermion compounds [3, 4, 5], while the TLS-induced 2CK physics [3, 6] has recently been experimentally realized in nanoscale metal point contacts [7]. Very lately, an artificial spin-\(\frac{1}{2}\) semiconductor quantum dot coupled to two independent electron reservoirs has been elegantly constructed [8] to test the 2CK physics [9]. Besides, the 2CK effect on electrical resistivity due to TLS is argued to be found in a ThAsSe single crystal [10]. Thus far, there has been no observation of the 2CK effect caused by the "simple" 3d magnetic transition-metal atoms. In this work, we report our finding of a non-Fermi liquid behavior in Al/AlO\textsubscript{x}/Sc planar tunnel junctions where a number of spin-\(\frac{1}{2}\) Sc atoms are present at or slightly inside the AlO\textsubscript{x}/Sc interface [11, 12].

Our planar tunnel junctions are composed of three layers: an Al (25 nm) film and a Sc (60 nm) film, separated by an insulating AlO\textsubscript{x} (1.5–2 nm) barrier. Both the Al and Sc films were thermally evaporated, while the AlO\textsubscript{x} layer was grown on the top surface of the Al film by oxygen glow discharge [13]. The low-temperature resistivities of our Al (Sc) films were typically \(\rho(4\text{ K}) \approx 13 \text{ (70)} \mu\Omega \text{ cm}.\) Lock-in techniques together with a bias circuitry were employed to measure the differential conductance \(dI/dV\) as a function of both bias voltage and temperature. The modulation voltages used were smaller than \(k_BT\) so that the main smearing was due to the thermal energy. The quality of the insulating barriers was checked according to the Rowell criteria [14] as well as by measuring the \(dI/dV\) curves below the superconducting transition temperature \((\sim 2\text{ K})\) of the Al films. At 0.25 K, a deep superconducting gap was evidenced in all junctions, ensuring that the conduction mechanism was governed by electron tunneling. Only the results for three representative samples (see Table I) will be discussed below. However, we stress that very similar effects have been found in a dozen of junctions, strongly suggesting that the observed 2CK physics is robust in the Al/AlO\textsubscript{x}/Sc planar tunnel structures.

The left inset to Fig. 1 shows the raw \(dI/dV\) data for the junction A at several temperatures between 2.2 and 35 K. One clearly sees conductance peaks around zero bias voltage, sitting on an asymmetric, parabolic background [15]. After subtracting this parabolic background, the excess conductance \(\Delta G\) contains a dominant even contribution \(G_{\text{even}} \equiv \frac{1}{2} (\Delta G(V) + \Delta G(-V))\) and a minor odd contribution \(G_{\text{odd}} \equiv \frac{1}{2} (\Delta G(V) - \Delta G(-V))\), where \(G_{\text{odd}} \lesssim 0.1G_{\text{even}}\). In this work, we focus on the even contribution and denote it as \(G(V,T)\). The main panel of Fig. 1 indicates that, as \(T\) reduces, the \(G(V,T)\) curves become narrower and the peaks higher. Such enhanced \(G(V,T)\) cannot be expected from the disorder-induced suppression of electronic density of states at the

| Sample | \(R_J\) (k\(\Omega\)) | \(A_J\) (\(\mu\text{A/mV}\)) | \(T^*\) (K) | \(T_{2CK}\) (K) |
|--------|-----------------|------------------|----------|-------------|
| A      | 2.2             | 0.5 \times 0.8   | 4        | 72          |
| B      | 1.2             | 0.5 \times 1.0   | 5        | 64          |
| C      | 5.0             | 1.0 \times 1.0   | 6        | 56          |
Fermi level due to the electron-electron interaction effects \[16\].

The magnitudes of the zero-bias conductance \(G(0,T)\) for junctions A–C are plotted in Fig. 2. At higher temperatures \((\sim 16–32 \text{ K})\), \(G(0,T)\) obeys a \(-\ln T\) law [Fig. 2(a)], suggesting a Kondo-like mechanism. Notably, in our intermediate temperature regime of \(5–16 \text{ K}\), \(G(0,T)\) for all three samples obey a \(-\sqrt{T}\) law [Fig. 2(b)], while a deviation from the \(-\sqrt{T}\) dependence starts at about 4 K. We first notice that, in the high \(T\) regime, both the \(G(0,T) \propto -\ln T\) behavior as well as our measured finite-bias \(G(V,T)\) spectra [13] can be well described by a perturbative theory that considers the \(s-d\) exchange coupling between tunneling electrons and isolated localized moments which reside slightly inside the barrier [12]. This observation firmly establishes the fact that localized moments are present in our oxide barriers. The formation of localized moments in our junctions most likely arise from the diffusion of some 3d\(^{1}\) Sc atoms slightly into the \(\text{AlO}_2\) barrier, e.g., during the fabrication process [11].

It is known that in the 2CK state the conductance \(g_{2CK}(V,T)\) due to electrons tunneling through an individual 2CK impurity residing in the barrier can be expressed by \(g_{2CK}(V,T) = g_{2CK}(0,0) - B\sqrt{T} \left(AeV/k_BT\right)\) [17, 18, 19], where \(A\) and \(B\) are nonuniversal constants which may depend on the distance of the 2CK impurity from the electrode/barrier interface. \(\Gamma(x)\) is a universal scaling function of \(x\) with the asymptotes \(1 + cx^2\) for \(|x| \ll 1\), and \(\frac{3}{2}\sqrt{|x|}\) for \(|x| \gg 1\), with \(c \approx 0.0758\) [17, 19]. For macroscopic junctions, there may be a numerator of 2CK impurities situated inside the barrier. If the interaction between these 2CK impurities can be neglected, the total conductance \(G_{2CK}(V,T)\) is additive: \(G_{2CK}(V,T) = G_{2CK}(0,0) - \sqrt{T} \sum_i B_i \Gamma (A_i eV/k_BT)\), where \(G_{2CK}(0,0) = \sum_i g_{2CK}(0,0)\). Therefore, the zero-bias conductance \(G_{2CK}(0,T)\) has a \(-\sqrt{T}\) dependence. To eliminate \(G_{2CK}(0,0)\), which cannot be measured directly, it is very useful to scale the conductance as a universal function of \(eV/k_BT\): \([G_{2CK}(0,T) - G_{2CK}(V,T)]/\sqrt{T} = \sum_i B_i \Gamma (A_i eV/k_BT) - 1\). This universal function leads to the asymptotes:

\[
\frac{G_{2CK}(0,T) - G_{2CK}(V,T)}{\sqrt{T}} = \begin{cases} 
  b_1 \left(\frac{eV}{k_BT}\right)^2, & \frac{|eV|}{k_BT} \ll 1 \\
  b_2 \sqrt{\frac{k_BT}{eV}} - b_3, & \frac{|eV|}{k_BT} \gg 1 
\end{cases}
\]

(1)

where \(b_1 = c \sum_i B_i A_i^2\), \(b_2 = \frac{2}{3} \sum_i B_i \sqrt{A_i}\), and \(b_3 = \sum_i B_i\). In the low bias region \((|eV|/k_BT \ll 1)\), the conductance can also be scaled into the form

\[
G_{2CK}(0,T) - G_{2CK}(V,T) = f_{2CK}(T) (eV/k_BT)^2,
\]

(2)

where \(f_{2CK}(T) = b_1 \sqrt{T}\).

The \(-\sqrt{T}\) behavior of \(G(0,T)\) in Fig. 2(b) suggests that our junctions fall in the 2CK phase in this intermediate temperature regime. In order to establish more and stronger evidences for this result, we have examined the scaling behavior of the finite bias conductance \(G(V,T)\). Our measured conductances at various temperatures are scaled according to the 2CK scaling form, Eq. (1), and
is plotted in Fig. 3(b). It shows that $G$ in Eq. (2) can be extracted from the low bias data, and demonstrate that our junctions fall in a 2CK state in this channel Kondo temperature, $T_{2CK}$. Therefore, the observed deviations (red dotted lines) from the 2CK scaling form listed in Table I. It should be noted that, in Fig. 3(a), the results are shown in Fig. 3(a). Notice that at intermediate temperatures ($\sim 5$–$16$ K), the data at different $T$ all collapse onto a single curve for $G(V,T)$ [18], the two-impurity Kondo model (2IKM) [24, 25], where the 2CK physics occurs at a critical coupling strength $I_c$, which separates a Kondo-screened phase from a local-singlet phase in the ground state. However, the existence of the 2CK fixed point due to the 2IKM coupled to a single electron reservoir requires some particle-hole symmetry [24, 25] which is hard to conceive in our junctions. Thus, the microscopic origin for our observed 2CK behavior as well as the deviation from the 2CK behavior below about 4 K is still not well understood in terms of available theories.

On the experimental side, it is intriguing that our 2CK effect is demonstrated in conventional planar tunnel junctions which contained 3$d^3$ transition-metal impurities. These are straightforward sample structures, equipped with the simplest possible dynamical impurities ($S = \frac{1}{2}$) for the Kondo phenomena [1]. Moreover, it should be noted that a deviation from the 2CK behavior has not been found in any previous experiments involving more exquisite artificial structures, such as metal point contacts [7] and semiconductor quantum dots [8], where the characteristic Kondo temperatures are relatively low, as compared with ours. The deviation could signify a crossover to a non-2CK phase as $T \rightarrow 0$ K. This issue deserves further investigations.

In summary, the 2CK non-Fermi liquid physics has been realized in the differential conductances of Al/AlO$_x$/Sc planar tunnel junctions. In the intermediate temperature regime, $G(0,T)$ reveals a $\propto -\sqrt{T}$ behavior. At lower temperatures, a deviation in $G(0,T)$ from the $\propto -\sqrt{T}$ behavior is found. These rich Kondo behaviors are believed to originate from a few localized spin-$\frac{1}{2}$ Sc atoms sitting at or slightly inside the AlO$_x$/Sc interface.

The authors thank A. M. Chang, C. H. Chung, T. A. Costi, D. L. Cox, F. Guinea, T. K. Ng, J. Kroha, Z. S. Ma, G. Zarand, and A. Zawadowski for helpful discussions. This work was supported by the Taiwan National Science Council through Grant No. 96-2112-M-009-025.
and by the MOE ATU Program.

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