ON THE PROPAGATION SPEED OF EVANESCENT MODES.({i})

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Abstract – The group-velocity of evanescent waves (in undersized waveguides, for instance) was theoretically predicted, and has been experimentally verified, to be Superluminal \((v_g > c)\). By contrast, it is known that the precursor speed in vacuum cannot be larger than \(c\). In this paper, by computer simulations based on Maxwell equations only, we show the existence of both phenomena. In other words, we verify the actual possibility of Superluminal group velocities, without violating the so-called (naive) Einstein causality.

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1. – Introduction

A series of recent experiments, performed at Cologne[1], Berkeley[2], Florence[3] and Vienna[4], revealed that evanescent waves seem to travel with a Superluminal group velocity \( v_g > c \). This originated a lot of discussion, since it is known — on the other hand — that the speed of the precursors cannot be larger than \( c \). For instance, the existence of Sommerfeld’s and Brillouin’s precursors (the so-called first and second precursors) has been recently stressed in refs.[5], while studying the transients in metallic waveguides.

In this paper we would like to address simultaneously both such problems, relevant for the understanding of the propagation of a signal; namely, the question of the (Superluminal) value of \( v_g \) in the evanescent case, and the question of the arrival time of the transients (which implies a nonviolation of the so-called Einstein causality).

From a historical point of view, let us recall that for long time the topic of the electromagnetic wave propagation velocity was regarded as already settled down by the works of Sommerfeld[6] and Brillouin[7]. Some authors, however, studying the propagation of light pulses in anomalous dispersion (absorbing) media both theoretically[8] and experimentally[9], found their envelope speed to be the group velocity \( v_g \), even when \( v_g \) exceeds \( c \), equals \( \pm \infty \), or becomes negative! In the meantime, evanescent waves were predicted[10] to be faster-than-light just on the basis of Special Relativistic considerations.

But evanescent waves in suitable (“undersized”) waveguides, in particular, can be regarded also as tunnelling photons[11], due to the known formal analogies[12] between the Schroedinger equation in presence of a potential barrier and the Helmholtz equation for a wave-guided beam. And it was known since long that tunnelling particles (wave packets) can move with Superluminal group velocities inside opaque barriers[13]; therefore, even from the quantum theoretical point of view, it was expected[13,11,10] that evanescent waves could be Superluminal.

In Sect.2 of this paper we shall first show how the first electric perturbation, reaching any point \( P \), always travels with the speed \( c \) of light in vacuum, \emph{independently of the medium}. Some comments will be added about the instant of appearance, and the behaviour in time, of the Sommerfeld’s and Brillouin’s precursors. The results of a computer simulation will be presented for free propagation in a dispersive medium, with the precursors arriving before the (properly said) signal.

In Sect.3, however, we shall deal by further computer simulations (always based on Maxwell equations only) with evanescent guided-waves, showing their group velocity to be Superluminal.
Finally, in Sects. 4 and 5 we shall deal with the transients associated with Superluminal evanescent waves: a study that, to our knowledge, was not carried on in the past.

2. – Precursors and Causality

Every perturbation passes through a transient state before reaching the stationary regime. This happens also when transmitting any kind of wave. In the case of electromagnetic waves, such a transient state is associated with the propagation of precursors, arriving before the principal signal. This fact seems to be enough to satisfy the requirements of the naive “Einstein causality”.

In particular, when investigating the free propagation of an electromagnetic wave, in a dispersive medium with resonances in correspondence with some discrete angular-frequencies \( \omega_j \), we can easily observe the arrival of the first and second precursors, followed by the arrival of the properly said signal. Let us consider for instance the motion in the \( z \) direction of a harmonic beam, such that at \( z = 0 \) one has:

\[
f(0, t) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_{\gamma-i\infty}^{\gamma+i\infty} \frac{e^{i\omega t}}{s + i\omega} ds = e^{i\omega t} \text{ for } t \geq 0
\]  

(1)

and \( f(0, t) = 0 \) for \( t < 0 \); where \( s \) is the complex integration variable, and \( \gamma > 0 \) in order that the function be transformable. Let us then consider a dispersive medium whose dielectric constant \( \varepsilon \) (electric permittivity) as a function of \( \omega \) is

\[
\varepsilon(\omega) = 1 + \sum_{j=0}^{N} \frac{a_j^2}{s^2 + sg_j + \omega_j^2}.
\]

(2)

In the present model (initially proposed by Maxwell himself) \( a_j \) is proportional to the number of oscillators per unit volume, \( g_j \) is the dissipation constant (due to molecular collisions) and \( \omega_j^2 \equiv \omega_j^2 - \frac{1}{2}a_j^2 \), quantity \( \omega_j \) being the \( j \)-th resonant angular-frequency[14]. The wave equation

\[
\frac{\partial^2 f}{\partial z^2} - \frac{\varepsilon}{c^2} \frac{\partial^2 f}{\partial t^2} = 0
\]

admits solutions of the form \( \exp[s(t - \beta z/c)] \), with \( \beta = \beta(\omega) = \sqrt{\varepsilon(\omega)} \), so that we can write [for \( \gamma \) and \( t \) positive]:

\[
f(z, t) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_{\gamma-i\infty}^{\gamma+i\infty} \frac{\exp[s(t - \beta z/c)]}{s + i\omega} ds.
\]

(3)
Since $\beta(\omega) \to 1$ when $s \to \pm\infty$, one has to distinguish the case $t - z/c < 0$ from the case $t - z/c > 0$. In the former, the integration path in the complex plane can be closed along an infinite-radius semicircunference on the right side, where no singularities exist, and the integral yields zero. In other words, one gets $f(z, t) = 0$ for $t < z/c$, in agreement with Einstein causality. In the latter case, to look for the mentioned precursors, one has to evaluate expression (3) for $t - z/c > 0$; this can be accomplished by applying the stationary phase[15] method (which provides an illuminating understanding of the question), following e.g. Brillouin’s[7] and Jackson’s[16] books. For example, the first precursor starts arriving at $t = z/c$ as a very high frequency disturbance which grows in amplitude but decreases in frequency with time. Its amplitude, after the maximum, decreases till the arrival of the second precursor, which —when there is only a resonance ($j = 0$) at $\omega = \omega_0$, and $g = 0$— starts at time $t = z\sqrt{\omega_0^2 + a^2}/\omega_0^2/c$, reaches a maximum, and then decreases, while the oscillation angular-frequency tends to the initial excitation angular-frequency $\omega$ which enters eq.(1). The properly said signal arrives afterwards (independently of the medium).

If we pass to consider, however, non-free propagation (in the vacuum) inside a wave guide, when a cutoff angular-frequency $\omega_c$ enters the play, the stationary phase method application is restricted by the fact that the propagation constant $\beta(\omega) = \omega\sqrt{1 - (\omega_c/\omega)^2}/c$ becomes imaginary for $\omega < \omega_c$. Nevertheless, if the beam contains also above-cutoff spectral components, then the first precursor evaluation—which depends only on the highest frequencies—are still possible, as shown, e.g., by Stenius and York[5]. We shall discuss such problems in the next Section.

Here, let us just simulate the free propagation of an electromagnetic field in a medium described by eq.(2) with $j = 0$, i.e., described by

$$\varepsilon(\omega) = 1 + \frac{a_0^2}{\omega_0^2 - \omega^2 - i\omega g_0},$$

with $a_0 = 2.2 \times 10^{10}$, $\omega_0 = 4.4\pi \times 10^{10}$, and $g_0 = -10^9$. Let us assume the electric field at $z = 0$ to be $f(0, t) = A t \exp[-at^2] \sin(\omega t)$ with $A = 10^9$ and $a = 5 \times 10^{17}$. Fig.1 shows such a function of time (in ns) for $\omega = 7$ GHz. The calculations then yield, for $z = 63$ m, the electric field in Fig.2. For evidencing the Sommerfeld and Brillouin precursors, it is necessary to magnify the vertical scale by a factor $10^4$: see Fig.3, where the horizontal axis is still the time axis (in ns). Fig.3 shows that the electric perturbation starts at $t = 210$ ns, corresponding to the time needed to travel 63 m with speed $c$, when the first
precursor starts arriving at \( z \) as a very high frequency field (in fact, the stationary phase method expects that immediately after \( t = z/c \) only the highest frequency components contribute to the integral (3)). The second precursor starts reaching \( z \) at \( t \approx 212.6 \) ns, in perfect agreement—again—with the stationary phase solution. Afterwards, the field angular-frequency tends to \( \omega = 7 \) GHz (stationary regime) and the properly said signal starts arriving.

3. – Propagation below the cutoff frequency

Let us come to the point we are more interested in, i.e., to the propagation in waveguides of pulses obtained by amplitude modulation of a carrier-wave endowed with an under-cutoff frequency; and let us recall that the experiments—for instance— in refs.[1-4] did actually detect in such a case a Superluminal group-velocity, \( v_g > c \) (in agreement with the classical[10] and the quantum[13] predictions).

For example, the work in refs.[1,17] put in particular evidence the fact that the segment of “undersized” (= operating with under-cutoff frequencies) waveguide provokes an attenuation of each spectral component, without any phase variation. More precisely, the unique phase variation detectable is due to the discontinuities in the waveguide cross-section (cf. also refs.[13]). Mathematically[18], the spectrum leaving an undersized waveguide segment (or photonic barrier) is simply the entering spectrum multiplied by the transfer function \( H(\omega) = \exp[i\beta L] \), with \( \beta(\omega) = \omega \sqrt{1 - (\omega_c/\omega)^2}/c \). For \( \omega > \omega_c \), the propagation constant \( \beta(\omega) \) is real, and \( H(\omega) \) represents a phase variation to be added to the outgoing spectrum. However, for \( \omega < \omega_c \), when \( \beta(\omega) \) is imaginary, the transfer function just represents an additional attenuation of the incoming spectrum.

In a sense, the two edges of a “barrier” (undersized waveguide segment: see Fig.4) can be regarded as semi-mirrors of a Fabry–Perot configuration. The consequent negative interference processes can lead themselves to Superluminal transit times. This points have been exploited, e.g., by Japha and Kurizki[19] (who claimed the barrier transit mean-time to be Superluminal provided that the coherence time \( \tau_c \) of the entering field \( \psi_{in}(t) \) is much larger than \( L/c \)).

4. – Our numerical experiments

As already mentioned, to investigate the interplay between Einstein causality and the fact that \( v_g \gg c \) when a signal is transported in a metallic waveguide by a carrier-wave
with $\omega_w < \omega_c$, one has to examine simultaneously the effects mentioned in Sects. 2 and 3.

Let us consider a signal obtained by a pulse-shaped amplitude modulation of a carrier-wave with frequency $f_w$ (in Fig. 5 the envelope of the wave is shown). Let us assume that the carrier-wave is switched on at time $t = 0$, so that at the (undersized) waveguide entrance ($z = 0$) the field will be $f(0, t) = 0$ for $t < 0$. The amplitude of the carrier-wave will reach a stationary state soon after the rise-time instant, $t_r$ (here defined as the time requested for the carrier amplitude to increase from 10% to 90% of its stationary value). A (smoothly prepared) gaussian pulse, with width $\Delta t$, be centered at $t = t_m$, ($t_m > t_r$). At time $t = t_d$, ($t_d > t_m + \Delta t$), the carrier wave is switched off (and its amplitude will decrease in a time of the order of $t_r$). Wishing to reveal the precursors too, it is important to use values of $t_r$ smaller than 100 ps (so to excite the higher frequency components with enough power). It is important, as well, to use a spectrally narrow pulse ($\Delta \omega \ll \omega_w$), so that one can go on calculating the group-velocity via the standard relation $v_g = \partial \omega / \partial \beta$.

A spectrally narrow pulse, moreover, allows us to examine the double barrier experiment[20], i.e. the most interesting configuration, without making recourse to external filters. The setup is shown in Fig. 6; the two photonic barriers are segments of undersized waveguide 25 and 50 mm long, respectively, with cross-section $23.45 \times 34.85 \text{ mm}^2$ and cutoff frequency 4.304 GHz. Between them, there is another segment, 101 mm long, of “normal-sized” waveguide, with cross-section $23.45 \times 48.85 \text{ mm}^2$ and cutoff frequency 3.07 GHz. The transfer function, illustrated in Fig. 7, was calculated by using a Fortran program[21] based on the method of moments (MoM), while the mode decomposition was performed in terms even modes TE$_{m0}$, with $m$ an odd number. As usual, the outgoing spectrum was evaluated by multiplying the incoming spectrum (Fig. 5) by the transfer function, that is to say by use of the inverse Fourier transform (within the software package Mathematica 2.2.3). It was chosen a carrier-wave with frequency $f_w = 3.574 \text{ GHz}$, corresponding to a minimum of $\partial \phi / \partial \nu$, where $\phi$ is the transfer-function phase. Let us recall that the magnitude of the transfer function for this frequency is the attenuation suffered by the electromagnetic wave along the two photonic barriers. The outgoing electric signal is shown in Fig. 8; in its inset (a) one can see the exact arrival time $t \simeq 0.488 \text{ ns}$, at the exit interface, of the first electric disturbance (such an instant differing a little from the one, $t = L/c \simeq 0.587 \text{ ns}$, predicted in Sect. 2, since in our simulation we used of course a finite “sample rate”, 0.4884 ns; by reducing this rate, a better result is obtained). In inset (b) we see the entering gaussian pulse, initially modulated and centered at $t = 800 \text{ ns}$.

In Fig. 9(a) the pulse peak is represented in more detail. From its arrival time, $t \simeq$
800.24 ns, we can derive the (Superluminal) group-velocity \( v_g = (176/0.24) \text{ mm/ns} \simeq 7.33 \times 10^8 \text{ m/s} \simeq 2.44 \, c \). If we want to evaluate the group-velocity by the relation \( v_g = \partial \omega / \partial \beta \), we get (all the derivatives being evaluated at the frequency \( f_w \) of the carrier-wave):

\[
v_g = \left. \frac{\partial \omega}{\partial \beta} \right|_{f_w} = 2\pi \left. \frac{\partial \nu}{\partial \beta} \right|_{f_w} = \frac{2\pi}{1000 \left. \frac{\partial \phi}{\partial \nu} \right|_{f_w}} \simeq 2.48 \, c ,
\]

in very good agreement with the previous value (their difference being smaller than 2%). In the previous simulation we used a pulse half-width \( \Delta \nu = 12 \text{ MHz} \), so that, as required, \( \Delta \nu / f_w \approx 0.0034 \ll 1 \).

Notice that the 0.24 ns spent by the pulse inside the setup of Fig.6 is due to the wave phase variation caused by the geometric discontinuities existing between the different waveguide segments which compose the analyzed setup (mainly the leading edges of the barriers): we shall come back to this point. One can therefore expect[22] such a transit time to be independent not only of the length of the barriers (Hartman effect: see refs.[13]), but even of the length of the “normal” waveguide inserted between the two barriers. This has been experimentally verified[20], and constitutes the most interesting fact revealed by refs.[1,17,20].

We repeated our computer simulation for the same setup depicted in Fig.6, when inserting between the undersized waveguides (barriers) a segment of “normal” waveguide 501 mm (instead of 101 mm) long; with a new, suitable choice of the carrier frequency (\( f_w = 3.5795 \text{ GHz} \)). The new pulse can be seen in Fig.9(b). The delay (transit time) resulted to be 0.336 ns, corresponding to a higher (Superluminal) group-velocity, \( v_g = (576/0.336) \) mm/ns \( \simeq 17.14 \times 10^8 \text{ m/s} \simeq 5.71 \, c \). Again, by using the standard definition, we obtain the very close value

\[
v_g = \left. \frac{\partial \omega}{\partial \beta} \right|_{f_w} \simeq 5.91 \, c ,
\]

their difference being less than 3.4%. Let us notice that the considered setup (Fig.6) works as a Fabry–Perot filter, so that, when the length \( L_2 \) of the intermediate (“normalized”) waveguide increases, the usable band width decreases. Of course, if we had chosen a carrier frequency outside the suited intervals, e.g. \( f_w = 5.58945 \text{ GHz} \) (non-evanescent case), we would have got a subluminal group-velocity. In fact, our calculations yield in this case that the outgoing pulse (see Fig.9c) is centered at \( t = 0.977 \text{ ns} \), corresponding to the group-velocity \( v_g = (176/0.977) \) mm/ns \( \simeq 0.6 \, c \).
5. – The case of an infinite undersized waveguide.

Let us stress once more that all the delays (non-zero transit times) found above, in our simulations of experiments, depend only on the phase variation suffered by the wave because of the geometric discontinuities in the waveguide. Actually, as already mentioned, the propagation constant $\beta(\omega)$ is imaginary for the under-cutoff frequencies, so that the transfer function $H(\omega)$ works only as an attenuation factor for such (evanescent) frequencies. However, the higher (non-evanescent) frequencies will be phase shifted, in such a way that $\beta(\omega)$ will tend to its free-space value $\omega/c$ for $\omega \to \infty$. In other words, the higher spectral components travel with speed $c$; they are the responsible both for the finite speed of the evanescent beams, and for the appearance of the precursors. [In the (theoretical) case that a pulse were constituted by under-cutoff frequencies only, the situation could therefore be rather different].

Anyway, let us eliminate the effect of the geometric discontinuities just by considering an electromagnetic signal which is already propagating inside an under-sized waveguide, and travelling between two parallel cross-sections separated by the distance $L$. The waveguide size be $5 \times 10 \text{ mm}^2$, and $L = 32.96 \text{ mm}$ (cf.Fig.10). The entering signal envelope is shown in Fig.11 as a function of time; the (smoothly prepared) gaussian pulses are centered at $t_m = 100, 170, 240$ and $300$ ns, respectively. In inset (a) the initial part (in time) of the mentioned envelope is shown, while in inset (b) one can see the peak of the gaussian pulse centered at 100 ns. After having travelled the considered distance $L$ through the undersized waveguide (characterized by the transfer function depicted in Fig.12), the evanescent signal arrives with the envelope shown in Fig.13. The shape is essentially the same (cf. also inset (b) of Fig.13), even if the amplitude is of course reduced. In inset (a) of Fig.13 one can see the initial part (in time) of the transmitted signal, arriving after 109.87 ps, which is exactly the time needed to travel 32.96 mm with the speed $c$ of light in vacuum. However, by comparing insets (b) of Figs.11 and 13, one deduces that the pulses travelled with infinite group-velocity, since the transmission of the pulse-peaks required zero time (instantaneous transmission).

It is interesting also to analyze the spectra of the entering (Fig.14) and arriving (Fig.15) signal. Fig.14 shows the Fourier transform of the signal presented in Fig.11, when it modulates in amplitude a carrier-wave with frequency 14.5 GHz. In the insets of Figs.14 and 15, we show the signal spectrum after magnifying the vertical scale by a factor $3 \times 10^4$; we can notice that the arriving signal possesses a spectral component (approximately centered at 15 GHz) that was not present in the entering spectrum: such
a new component corresponds to the waveguide cutoff value, 15 GHz in this case.

After the transients, the real signal arrives, with a Superluminal (even infinite) group-velocity.

6. – Conclusions.

At this point, one can accept that a signal is really carried (not by the precursors, but) by well-defined amplitude bumps, as in the case of information transmission by the Morse alphabet, or the transmission of a number e.g. by a series of equal (and equally spaced) pulses. In such a case, we saw above that the signal can travel even at infinite speed, in the considered situations. It is important also to notice, when comparing Fig.13 with Fig.11, that the width of the arriving pulses does not change with respect to the initial ones. The signal, however, cannot overcome the transients, “slowly” travelling with speed $c$.

Even if the AM signal were totally constituted by under-cutoff frequencies, when the experiment is started (e.g., by switching on the carrier wave) one does necessarily meet a transient situation, which generates precursors.

One might think, therefore, of arranging a setup (permanently switched on) for which the precursors are sent out long in advance, and waiting afterwards for the moment at which the need arises of transmitting a signal with Superluminal speed (without violating the naive “Einstein causality”, as far as it requires only that the precursors do not travel at speed higher than $c$). Some authors, as the ones in refs.[1,17,20], do actually claim that they can build up (smooth) signals by means of under-cutoff frequencies only, without generating further precursors: in such a case one would be in presence, then, of Superluminal information transmission.

However, on the basis of our calculations (which imply the existence also of above-cutoff frequencies in any signal: cf. the inset of Fig.14) this does not seem to be true in practice. If, in reality, to start sending out a signal means to create some discontinuities (i.e., to generate new precursors), and if the signal cannot bypass the precursors (even when the carrier was switched on long in advance), then information could not be transmitted faster than light by the experimental devices considered above, in spite of the fact that evanescent signals travel with Superluminal group-velocity.

Such critical issues deserve further investigation, and we shall come back to them elsewhere (for instance, a problem is whether one must already know the whole information content of the signal when starting to send it; in such a case, it would become acceptable
the mathematical trick of representing any signal by an analytical function[23]). But we have seen that, in any case, the evanescent modes travel for some distance with faster-than-light speed; and at least in three further sectors of experimental physics Superluminal motions might have been already observed[24]. Therefore, it is worthwhile to recall here, in this regard, that Special Relativity itself can, and was, extended[25] to include also Superluminal motions on the basis of its ordinary postulates; solving seemingly also the known causal paradoxes[26] associated in the past with tachyonic motions.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS:

Fig.1 – The electric field at $z = 0$ as a function of time (in ns), for $\omega = 7$ GHz (see the text).

Fig.2 – The same electric field considered in Fig.1, after having travelled 63 m in a medium characterized by eq.(2').

Fig.3 – Same as Fig.2, with the vertical scale magnified by a factor $10^4$. The Sommerfeld and Brillouin precursors start arriving at times $t_0$ and $t_1$, respectively.

Fig.4 – A waveguide with a segment of “photonic barrier”, i.e., of undersized waveguide (evanescence region).

Fig.5 – Envelope of a gaussian signal (centered at $t_m = 800.00$ ns, with width $\Delta t = 37.32$ ns) obtained by amplitude modulation of a carrier-wave. We assume the carrier-wave to
be switched on at time $t = 0$; inset (a) shows the rise time, $t_r = 37.70$ ns, of the carrier amplitude (for increasing from 10% to 90% of its stationary value).

Fig.6 – The experimental setup considered for our simulations.

Fig.7 – The transfer function corresponding to the setup in Fig.6. Its magnitude and phase are represented by the pointed and solid lines, respectively. Notice that the intervals in which the phase derivative is lower coincide with the dips of the magnitude.

Fig.8 – Aspect of the signal in Fig.5, after having propagated through the setup in Fig.6. Inset (a) shows the arrival time of its initial part.

Fig.9 – Detailed representation of the signal peak, after propagation through the setup in Fig.6 with different lengths $L_2$ of the intermediate (“normal-sized”) waveguide and with different carrier frequencies $f_w$: (a) $L_2 = 101$ mm, and 5.574 GHz; (b) $L_2 = 501$ mm, and 3.5795 GHz; (c) again $L_2 = 101$ mm, but $f_w = 5.58945$ GHz.

Fig.10 – The (indefinite) undersized waveguide considered in our simulations, when eliminating any geometric discontinuity in its cross-section. We chose $L = 32.96$ mm.

Fig.11 – Envelope of the initial signal, considered in our simulation for signal propagation through the new setup in Fig.10. Inset (a) shows in detail the initial part of this signal as a function of time, while inset (b) shows the gaussian pulse peak centered at $t = 100$ ns.

Fig.12 – The transfer function corresponding to the new setup in Fig.10. Its magnitude and phase are represented by lines (a) and (b), respectively.

Fig.13 – Envelope of the signal in Fig.11 after having propagated through the undersized waveguide in Fig.10. Inset (a) shows in detail the initial part (in time) of such arriving signal, while inset (b) shows the peak of the gaussian pulse that had been initially modulated by centering it at $t = 100$ ns (one can see that its propagation took zero time).

Fig.14 – Spectrum of the entering signal. In the inset, the vertical scale was magnified $3 \times 10^4$ times.
Fig.15 – Spectrum of the arriving signal. From the inset, where the vertical scale was again magnified by the factor $3 \times 10^4$, one can notice the appearance of a new spectral component at 15 GHz.

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