Crossed Andreev reflection-induced magnetoresistance

Francesco Giazotto,† Fabio Taddei,† and Fabio Beltram

NEST CNR-INFM and Scuola Normale Superiore, I-56126 Pisa, Italy

Rosario Fazio

NEST CNR-INFM and Scuola Normale Superiore, I-56126 Pisa, Italy
and International School for Advanced Studies (SISSA), I-34014 Trieste, Italy

We show that very large negative magnetoresistance can be obtained in magnetic trilayers in a current-in-plane geometry owing to the existence of crossed Andreev reflection. This spin-valve consists of a thin superconducting film sandwiched between two ferromagnetic layers whose magnetization is allowed to be either parallelly or antiparallelly aligned. For a suitable choice of structure parameters and nearly fully spin-polarized ferromagnets the magnetoresistance can exceed $-80\%$. Our results are relevant for the design and implementation of spintronic devices exploiting ferromagnet-superconductor structures.

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Giant Magnetoresistance (GMR) is the pronounced response in the resistance of magnetic multilayers to an applied magnetic field $[1, 2, 3, 4, 5]$. This phenomenon has prompted a very large interest owing to its broad range of applications, spanning from magnetic recording to position sensor technology, and to the fundamental interest in spin-dependent effects $[6]$. A magnetic multilayer consists of an alternating sequence of ferromagnetic (F) and non-magnetic layers (N). The relative orientation of magnetic moments in the F layers can be driven from antiparallel (AP), in the absence of external field, to parallel (P), with a small (up to some hundreds of Oe) magnetic field. GMR was originally demonstrated $[5]$ in Fe/Cr multilayers with current flowing parallel to the planes, the so-called current-in-plane (CIP) configuration. In the CIP measurement the magneto-resistance (MR) ratio, defined as the maximum relative change in resistance resulting from applying the external field, is typically around 10% for a number of layers of the order of 50 $- 100$ $[5]$. These values can be increased up to $\sim 100\%$ in the case of current flow perpendicular to the multilayer plane (CPP configuration) $[6]$. In this Letter we show that the limitations of the CIP configuration can be overcome by employing a superconductor (S) in the non-magnetic portion of the multilayer. The use of superconductors in spintronics is not new. As a matter of fact, superconductors were used already in the very first CPP experiment $[6]$ in order to minimize the extra resistance introduced in contacting the multilayered structure to the measuring apparatus. The peculiar properties of FS structures have been studied for several years and this field has been recently reviewed in Ref. $[7]$. The structure we envision (see Fig. 1) consists of two identical diffusive ferromagnetic layers ($F_1$ and $F_2$), of thickness $t_F$, separated by a (s-wave) superconducting layer of thickness $t_S$. The layers are assumed to be in good metallic contact and have length $L$ and width $w$. The magnetization of the two ferromagnets is allowed to be aligned either in a parallel or an antiparallel configuration $[8]$. The trilayer is connected to ferromagnetic leads separated by an insulating layer (light-yellow regions in Fig. 1) of the same thickness as the S layer. The magne-

FIG. 1: (color online) Sketch of the FSF spin-valve. A thin superconducting film is sandwiched between two identical ferromagnetic layers whose magnetizations (yellow arrows) can be aligned both in the parallel (P) and antiparallel (AP) configuration. An electric current (white dashed arrows) is allowed to flow through the system parallel to the layers. The schematic representation of the spin-valve effect for half-metallic ferromagnets, showing the diagrams of the superconducting density of states, is displayed in (a) and (b). (a) In the P alignment, the lack of quasiparticles with opposite spin hinders the condensation of two electrons injected from the ferromagnets in a Cooper pair in S. As a consequence, the electric transport is confined within the F layers. (b) In the AP configuration, two electrons with opposite spin injected from the F layers can form a Cooper pair within the superconductor thanks to crossed Andreev reflection, thus "shunting" the current through the whole structure (see text).
tization of the upper F leads is equal to the one relative to layer F1, and analogously for the lower F leads. In the CIP configuration, charge transport in the system is dominated by crossed Andreev reflection (CAR) leading to a dramatic enhancement of the magnetoresistance. CAR was analyzed in several papers, notably in relation to quantum information processing, and very recently it was observed experimentally in FS structures. Here we emphasize its potential for spintronics.

Let us first describe qualitatively the principle of operation of the present spin-valve. For the sake of clarity, let us first consider a half-metallic (i.e., with only one spin species) ferromagnet in good metallic contact with a S layer. Quasiparticles with energy below the superconductor gap can be transferred into the superconductor as Cooper pairs only through an Andreev reflection (AR) process. The latter consists of a coherent scattering event in which a spin-up (down) electron-like quasiparticle, originating from the F layer, is retroreflected at the interface with the superconductor as a spin-down (up) hole-like quasiparticle into the ferromagnet. Since only quasiparticles (electron- and hole-like) of one spin type exist in the ferromagnet, no current can flow between the F and S layers. Similarly, in the case of the FSF trilayer in the P configuration (see Fig. 1(a)), the two F layers cannot transfer charge into the superconductor. Current is confined to the F layers and it consists of fully-polarized quasiparticles. If the S layer is thin enough quasiparticles can also tunnel through it (this will occur for $t_S$ values up to some superconductor coherence lengths ($\xi_0$)). In the AP configuration (see Fig. 1(b)), each of the two F layers can contribute separately to the quasiparticle current through the structure just like in the P configuration. More importantly CAR does take place. In this case a Cooper pair is formed in the superconductor by a spin-up electron originating from the F1 layer and a spin-down electron from the F2 layer. In the AR language, this can be described as the transmission of a spin-up electron-like quasiparticle from one of the F layers to a spin-down hole-like quasiparticle in the other F layer. This is now possible since the quasiparticles involved belong to the majority spin species in each of the two layers. A charge current can therefore flow through the S layer as a supercurrent, thereby shunting the conduction channels in the ferromagnets. This contribution to the current will dominate at least when the structure is long enough and the quasiparticle contribution in the F layers becomes negligible (note that the conductance of each F layer in the diffusive regime is proportional to $\ell/L$, where $\ell \ll L$ is the mean free path). As a result, one can expect the conductance $G_{AP}$ of the AP configuration to be much larger than the conductance $G_P$ of the P configuration. This can give rise to a large, negative value of the MR ratio, defined as:

$$MR = \frac{G_P - G_{AP}}{G_P}.$$  

A simple expression for the MR ratio for half-metallic ferromagnets in the diffusive regime can be derived as follows. In the P configuration, the conductance is approximately given by

$$G_P \simeq 2\frac{e^2}{h} \frac{\ell}{L} N_\uparrow,$$

i.e., it is proportional to the number $N_\uparrow$ of open channels for spin-up electrons of each F layer, and inversely proportional to $L$. In the AP configuration, the conductance can be roughly separated in two contributions. One ($G^*$), due to CAR, is virtually independent of $L$. The other comes from the direct transmission of quasiparticles (proportional to $(2e^2/h)(\ell/L)N_\uparrow$):

$$G_{AP} \simeq G^* + \alpha \frac{e^2}{h} \frac{\ell}{L} N_\uparrow,$$

with $\alpha$ being a numerical factor $\sim 1$. As a result,

$$MR \simeq 1 - \alpha - G^* \frac{h}{2e^2} \frac{1}{\ell} L \frac{1}{\ell} N_\uparrow,$$

negative and large for $L \gg \ell$. This is in contrast to what expected in a FNF trilayer, where the MR value is positive since the AP configuration yields a reduction of the structure conductance. For non half-metallic ferromagnets, the charge current will still be dominated by CAR, but the effect will be reduced.

This qualitative understanding of the effect can be validated by a numerical calculation of the conductance, which was performed within the Landauer-Büttiker scattering approach. In the presence of superconductivity, the zero-temperature and zero-bias conductance can be written as

$$G_\sigma = \frac{e^2}{h} \left[ \mathcal{T}_\sigma + T_\sigma^a + 2 \frac{R_\sigma^a R_\sigma^a - T_\sigma T_\sigma^a}{R_\sigma^a + R_\sigma^a + T_\sigma + T_\sigma^a} \right].$$

is the spin-dependent conductance. In Eq. 5 $\mathcal{T}_\sigma$ ($T_\sigma^a$) is the spin-dependent normal (Andreev) transmission probability for quasi-particles injected from the left lead and arriving on the right lead, while $R_\sigma^a$ is the Andreev reflection probability for quasi-particles injected from the left lead. Similarly, $T_\sigma^a$ and $R_\sigma^a$ are the Andreev scattering probabilities for quasiparticles injected from the right lead. $e$ is the electron charge and $h$ is the Planck constant. The scattering amplitudes were evaluated numerically by making use of a recursive Green’s function technique based on a tight-binding version of the Bogoliubov-de Gennes equations

$$\begin{pmatrix} \mathcal{H} & \Delta \\ \Delta^* & -\mathcal{H}^* \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} u \\ v \end{pmatrix} = E \begin{pmatrix} u \\ v \end{pmatrix},$$

(6)
where $\mathcal{H}$ is the single-particle Hamiltonian, and $u$ ($v$) is the coherence factor for electron- (hole)-like excitations of energy $E$, measured from the condensate chemical potential $\mu$. Within the tight-binding description, $\mathcal{H}$ and $\Delta$ are matrices with elements $(\mathcal{H})_{ij} = \epsilon_i \delta_{ij} - \gamma \delta_{(i,j)}$ and $(\Delta)_{ij} = \Delta \delta_{ij}$, where $\epsilon_i$ is the on-site energy at site $i$, $\gamma$ is the hopping potential and $\Delta_i$ is the superconducting gap ($\{\ldots\}$ stand for first-nearest-neighbor sites). In particular, $\epsilon_i = \epsilon_S$ in the S region, $\epsilon_i = \epsilon_1$ in the insulating barrier, and $\epsilon_i = \epsilon_F = \epsilon_S \mp h_{\text{exc}}$ in the F layers, $h_{\text{exc}}$ denoting the fermionic exchange energy, with upper (lower) sign referring to majority (minority) spin species. $\Delta_i$ is assumed to be constant and equal to zero-temperature gap ($\Delta_0$) in the S region, and zero everywhere else. Note that this is realistic when the S layer thickness is larger than $\xi_0$ [21]. Furthermore, disorder due both to impurities and lattice imperfections is introduced by the Anderson model, i.e., by adding to each on-site energy a random number chosen in the range $[-U/2, U/2]$, being $U$ a fraction of the Fermi energy. In what follows we shall indicate energies in units of $\Delta_0$, and lengths in units of the lattice constant $a$ (of the order of the Fermi wavelength).

In order to analyze the behavior of conductances and MR as a function of the various parameters we used a two-dimensional (2D) model of the structure, i.e., we assumed a single lattice site in the $z$-direction (see Fig. 1). In our calculations the tight-binding parameters were chosen to describe metallic materials: $\epsilon_S = 20$, $\epsilon_1 = 10^3$, $\gamma = 10$, so that $\xi_0 = (2a/\pi) \sqrt{4(\gamma/\Delta_0)^2 - \epsilon_0^2}/\Delta_0 = 9.0$. We set $U = 8$ and $L = 150$, so that the F layers are in the diffusive regime. To avoid a self-consistent calculation of the superconducting gap, we limited our analysis to values of $t_S \geq 30$ (corresponding to $\simeq 3.3\xi_0$) [21, 22]. In addition, the conductance was calculated performing an ensemble average over 100 realizations of disorder.

The conductance and MR dependence on S layer thickness is shown in Fig. 2. Here we chose the ferromagnetic thickness $t_F = 5$ and $h_{\text{exc}} = 20$ (the mean free path turns out to be $\ell \simeq 21$). For this latter value the ferromagnet polarization ($P$) [23] is equal to 100%. Figure 2(a) shows that in the P configuration the conductance $G_P$ is initially slightly decreasing and roughly constant for $t_S \geq 5.5\xi_0$. This is due to the fact that quasiparticles in the two F layers (for large enough $t_S$ values $\geq 5.5\xi_0$) are decoupled, but some direct tunneling can occur through thinner S layers. In the AP configuration, the conductance $G_{AP}$ decreases until the value $t_S \approx 8.5\xi_0$ is reached, and thereafter remains almost constant. Such behavior is expected since, on the one hand, for $t_S$ of the order of some $\xi_0$ the conductance is dominated by the supercurrent (mediated by CAR between the F$_1$ and F$_2$ layers). On the other hand, by increasing $t_S$, the two F layers tend to decouple and the current through the structure is only due to quasiparticles flowing separately through them, independently of $t_S$. The resulting MR ratio is shown in Fig. 2(b) and exhibits very large negative values around $-70\%$ for $t_S \approx 3.5\xi_0$ and about $-25\%$ for $t_S \approx 6.5\xi_0$. It is noteworthy to mention that when the S layer is in the normal state (i.e., a FNF trilayer) MR $\simeq (0.7 \pm 1.8)\%$ for $t_S = 4.5\xi_0$.

The role the F layers thickness on the conductance and magnetoresistance is analyzed in Fig. 3 for fixed $t_F = 40$ and $P = 100\%$. Figure 3(a) shows that the conductance in the P alignment increases linearly with $t_F$ according to the estimate in Eq. 5A. In the AP configuration the conductance is again linear in $t_F$ with the same slope, but it is shifted upwards as compared to $G_P$. This is in
We finally analyze the behavior of MR, for $t_S = 40$ and $t_F = 5$, as a function of the polarization of the F layers. Figure 4 shows that the value of the MR ratio remains smaller than $\sim -30\%$ up to $P \simeq 87\%$ and then grows to larger negative values. Highly spin-polarized ferromagnets are thus required for the effect to be maximized. The fluctuations present in the MR($P$) curve can be ascribed to opening and closing of conducting channels in the F layers as well as to size effects.

A 3D structure was also considered, allowing the system to extend in the $z$ direction (see Fig. 1). The calculations, performed for several values of the structure width ($w$), confirmed qualitatively the overall results found in the 2D case. We finally stress the importance of a good metallic contact between F and S layers. The presence of a barrier at the FS interface would indeed lead to a suppression of CAR and therefore of the MR value.

In conclusion, we have investigated theoretically spin transport in a ferromagnet-superconductor-ferromagnet trilayer in the current-in-plane geometry. We showed that very large and negative magnetoresistance values (exceeding $-80\%$) can be achieved. Such an effect relies entirely on the existence of crossed Andreev reflection. The results presented here are promising in light of the implementation of novel-concept magnetoresistive devices such as, for instance, spin-switches as well as magnetoresistive memory elements. To this end, half-metallic ferromagnets such as CrO$_2$, NiMnSb, Sr$_2$FeMoO$_6$, and La$_{2/3}$Sr$_{1/3}$MnO$_3$ appear as particularly suitable. Also the Ga$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$Mn$_2$As material system, exploiting a superconductor in combination with heavily-doped ferromagnetic semiconductor layers, appears to be a good candidate for the implementation of this structure, thanks to Ga$_{1-x}$Mn$_x$. As predicted half-metallic nature (for $x \geq 0.125$) and to its well-developed technology.

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* Electronic address: giuzotto@sns.it
† Electronic address: taddei@sns.it

FIG. 4: (color online) MR ratio versus $P$ with $t_S = 40$, and $t_F = 5$. The same parameters as for Fig. 2 were used.

\[ G_F - G_{AP} \sim G^* \]

\[ P \simeq 0.5\xi_0 \]
effect is quite reduced due both to a gap suppression \cite{21} and to direct quasiparticle tunneling which becomes dominant through thinner superconducting layers.

\cite{23} The ferromagnet bulk polarization is defined as \( P = \frac{h_{\text{exc}}}{4\gamma - \epsilon_S} \).

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