Electrical probing of the spin conductance of mesoscopic cavities

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Received 18 January 2009, in final form 26 February 2009
Published 20 March 2009
Online at stacks.iop.org/JPhysCM/21/155503

Abstract

We investigate spin-dependent transport in multiterminal mesoscopic cavities with spin–orbit coupling. Focusing on a three-terminal set-up we show how injecting a pure spin current or a polarized current from one terminal generates additional charge current and/or voltage across the two output terminals. When the injected current is a pure spin current, a single measurement allows us to extract the spin conductance of the cavity. The situation is more complicated for a polarized injected current, and we show in this case how two purely electrical measurements on the output currents give the amount of current that is solely due to spin–orbit interaction. This allows us to extract the spin conductance of the device in this case as well. We use random matrix theory to show that the spin conductance of chaotic ballistic cavities fluctuates universally about zero mesoscopic average and describe experimental implementations of mesoscopic spin to charge current converters.

Many recent theoretical, experimental and numerical investigations have explored possibilities to generate spin currents and accumulations in spin–orbit coupled diffusive [1–14] and ballistic [15–18] systems. The main focus of this field of spin–orbitronics is on purely electrostatic generation of spin currents via application of charge currents and/or voltage biases at appropriate lead contacts to the device. The amount of spin current generated by a given bias defines a spin conductance $G(\sigma)$ characterizing the spin generation efficiency of the device. Although $G(\sigma)$ is theoretically convenient, no realistic set-up to experimentally probe it has been proposed to date. Such a set-up is highly desirable for ballistic mesoscopic cavities, which typically feature relatively high spin conductances [16, 18]. This property is, however, not sufficient to make them good candidate components for low-power spintronic devices because of the relatively large mesoscopic fluctuations exhibited by their spin conductance [16]. Originating from the phase coherence of spin transport, these fluctuations are beyond the existing measurement proposals which are based on theories describing ensemble averaged diffusive transport of spins, assuming locally well-defined spin accumulations [19–21].

In this paper, we propose to use spin–orbit coupled ballistic mesoscopic cavities as spin to charge current converters to experimentally analyze spin currents and spin accumulations in meso- and nanoscopic devices. We show how the spin conductance of such cavities can be directly measured from the amount of charge current they generate out of conventionally injected spin currents.

For simplicity, we choose the spin to charge current converter to be an open three-terminal quantum dot with spin–orbit coupling—this is sketched in figure 1(a)—though our discussion is straightforwardly generalized to multiterminal cavities with any number of leads greater than two. The spin accumulation $\mu(\sigma)$ (the components give the difference in chemical potential of different spin species along the corresponding spin direction) in a bulk electron reservoir generates a spin current $I_{\sigma}^{(s)}$ injected into the dot from terminal 1 [14]. Spin–orbit coupling inside the dot acts on the pure spin part of this current in a manner similar to the inverse spin Hall effect [13]—it converts it into either a transverse charge current or a voltage difference between lead 2 and lead 3. This conversion differs, however, from the inverse spin Hall effect in that it is fully coherent and it couples different spin polarization. Measuring this charge current/voltage allows us to extract the spin conductance of the cavity. We consider two classes of measurements, defining two different spin conductances $G(\sigma_1)$ and $G(\sigma_2)$. In the first one, the voltage on terminal 1 is set such that $I_{\sigma_1}^{(s)}$ is a pure spin current, without charge component, $I_1 = 0$. Then $I_2 = -I_3$ are entirely due

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NM injects spins into the reservoir. In figure 1(c) we sketch electron (hole) reservoir. Passing a current between F and NM, the electric effects [24–27]. Figure 1(b) illustrates the first method, for generating this spin current from a spin accumulation generated by (b) a ferromagnet, (c) polarized photons and (d) a charge current in the spin–orbit coupled reservoir 1. For these three mechanisms, it is straightforward to invert the spin accumulation, allowing us to extract the spin conductance of the cavity from two measurements of the output charge current/voltage at opposite spin accumulations. (This figure is in colour only in the electronic version)

Figure 1. (a) Three-terminal ballistic quantum dot as a mesoscopic spin current to charge current converter. The output electrodes 2 and 3 are at the same fixed potential $V = 0$, while the input electrode 1 is at potential $V_i$. Spins are injected into the dot from electrode 1. We argue that spin–orbit coupling can convert this spin current into a charge current across electrodes 2 and 3 (dashed blue arrow). We discuss three possible mechanisms for generating this spin current from a spin accumulation generated by (b) a ferromagnet, (c) polarized photons and (d) a charge current.

To demonstrate the existence of a spin component in the current, one thus needs to isolate that part of $I_1$ or $I_3$ which is contributed by the spin–orbit conversion of $I_s$. In all cases, the spin accumulation, generated a distance shorter than the spin relaxation length but longer than the mean free path away from the point contact, diffuses to and flows through the ballistic cavity. Then, the ballistic processes connecting the spin injector part of the circuit with the cavity can be ignored and the reservoir can be viewed as having a well-defined spin accumulation $\mu^{(s)}$.

We formalize our theory. An open quantum dot is coupled to three bulk reservoirs via ideal point contacts, each carrying $N_i$ open channels ($i = 1, 2, 3$). We assume that spin–orbit coupling exists only inside the dot. Given that the dot and the reservoirs are made of the same material, this is justified when (i) the openings to the electrodes are small enough that the spin–orbit time is shorter than the mean dwell time spent by an electron in the dot and (ii) the accumulations in the reservoirs are generated a distance shorter than the spin–orbit length away from the dot. We follow the scattering approach to transport and start from the linear relation between currents and chemical potentials [28]:

$$I_i^{(s)} = \frac{e}{\hbar} \sum_\beta \left( 2N_i \delta_{\alpha\beta} - T_{ij}^{(s\beta)} \right) \mu_i^{(\alpha)} - \frac{e}{\hbar} \sum_{j \neq i, \beta} T_{ij}^{(s\beta)} \mu_j^{(\beta)}. \quad (1)$$

Here, $\mu_i^{(\alpha)} = eV_i$ ($V_i$ is the voltage applied to terminal $i$) and $\mu_j^{(\beta)}$ are the components of the spin accumulation vector $\mu_i^{(s)}$, giving the difference in chemical potential between the two spin species along the corresponding axis, i.e. $\mu_i^{(z)} = \mu_i^{(\uparrow)} - \mu_i^{(\downarrow)}$, while $I_j^{(0)} \equiv I_i$ and $I_i^{(\alpha)}$ are the charge current and the components of the spin current vector, all evaluated in terminal $i$. We introduced the spin-dependent transmission probabilities

$$T_{ij}^{(s\beta)} = \sum_{m,n,l \in \alpha} \text{Tr}[t_{mn}^{(s\alpha)} t_{ln}^{(s\beta)}]. \quad (2)$$
where $\sigma^{(\alpha)}$, $\alpha = 0, x, y, z$ are Pauli matrices ($\sigma^{(0)}$ is the identity matrix), the trace is taken over the spin degree of freedom and $t_{mn}$ is a $2 \times 2$ matrix of spin-dependent transmission amplitudes from channel $n$ in lead $j$ to channel $m$ in lead $i$. In [16], only transmission probabilities $T_{ij}^{(0)}$ were considered, because the reservoirs had no spin accumulation, and consequently spin currents were determined by a single polarization direction.

We need to determine the chemical potentials. First, reservoir 1 is kept at a fixed voltage $V_1$ and spin accumulation $\mu_1^{(s)} = \mu^{(s)}$. Second, we set the electrochemical potentials to zero in reservoirs 2 and 3. Third, because the leads are ideally connected to the dot, and because reservoirs 2 and 3 see no source of spins other than the one injected from the cavity, we also set the spin accumulations of reservoirs 2 and 3 to zero. Under these conditions, the components of $I_i^{(s)}$ are

$$I_i^{(s)} = \frac{e}{h} \sum_\beta (2N_1 \delta_{i\beta} - T_{1i}^{(s)} \mu_1^{(\beta)}).$$

(3)

Unless very specific conditions are met, $I_i^{(s)}$ is finite. The charge currents in lead $j = 2, 3$ are

$$I_j = -\frac{e}{h} T_{i1}^{(0)} V_1 - \frac{e}{h} \sum_\beta T_{i1}^{(0)} \mu_1^{(\beta)}.$$

(4)

The first contribution to $I_j$ is the well-known nonlocal charge conductance of the cavity. We are mostly interested in the second contribution which corresponds to the conversion of the spin accumulation to charge current. In order to extract the spin conductance of the cavity from the current measurement, we isolate this second contribution by switching the polarization direction $m$ of the spin accumulation.

This can be achieved, for example, for ferromagnetic injection by temporarily applying an external magnetic field in the appropriate direction. Within linear response the only effect of doing this is to switch the direction of the spin accumulation in reservoir 1, $\mu_1^{(s)} = \mu^{(s)} m \rightarrow -\mu^{(s)}$, without changing its voltage bias, $V_1 \rightarrow V_1$. The spin conductance of the cavity:

$$G_j^{(s)} = I_j(m) - I_j(-m))/2\mu^{(s)} = -\frac{e}{h} \sum_\beta T_{i1}^{(0)} m_1^{(\beta)}.$$  

(5)

is then directly extracted from the difference in the charge current in lead $j = 2, 3$ between these two measurements. This first definition of the spin conductance is appropriate in the linear response regime only.

When the spin injection part of the circuit is not operating within linear response, inverting the magnetization direction results in different magnitudes of the chemical potentials. In this regime we instead apply a charge voltage bias on lead 1 such that the current through it vanishes, $I_1 = 0$. Then the pure spin current that flows through lead 1 generates a charge current flowing from lead 2 to lead 3 giving a spin conductance

$$G_j^{(s2)} = -\frac{e}{h} \sum_\beta \left( \frac{T_{1j}^{(0)} T_{1i}^{(0)}}{2N_1 - T_{1i}^{(0)}} + T_{1j}^{(0)} \right) m_1^{(\beta)}.$$  

(6)

It is remarkable that, when $N_1 = 1$, both definitions of the spin conductance are equal and one has $G_2^{(s1)} = G_2^{(s2)} = -G_3^{(s1)}$ = $-G_3^{(s2)}$, because then time reversal symmetry imposes $T_{11}^{(0)} = 0, \forall \beta \neq 0$. Equations (5) and (6) are general and do not rely on any assumption on the charge/spin dynamics in the cavity.

From now on we focus on the experimentally relevant case of a coherent quantum dot with chaotic ballistic electron dynamics. Accordingly, we use random matrix theory (RMT) to calculate the average and fluctuations of $I_{2,3}$ [29]. RMT replaces the system’s scattering matrix $S$—whose elements are given by the transmission amplitudes $t_{mn}$, as well as reflection amplitudes—by a random unitary matrix. Our interest resides on systems with time reversal symmetry (absence of magnetic field) and totally broken spin rotational symmetry (strong spin-orbit coupling), as in the experiments of [30, 31]. In this case $S$ is an element of the circular symplectic ensemble (CSE). Following [16], we rewrite the generalized transmission probabilities $T_{ij}^{(s)}$ as a trace over $S$:

$$T_{ij}^{(s)} = \text{Tr} \left[ \delta_{ij} S Q_j^{(s)} S^T \right].$$

(7)

Here, $m$ and $n$ are channel indices, while $\mu$ and $\nu$ are spin indices. The trace is taken over both sets of indices.

Averages, variances and covariances of the generalized transmission probabilities, equation (7), over the CSE can be calculated using the method of [29]. Experimentally, these quantities correspond to an ensemble of measurements on differently shaped quantum dots at different global electrochemical potentials. The RMT averaged transmission probabilities are

$$\langle T_{ij}^{(s)} \rangle = \frac{2\delta_{i\beta}}{N_T - 1/2} \left[ N_1 N_j \delta_{i0} - (\delta_{i0} - 1/2) N_i \delta_{ij} \right].$$

(8)

Together with the covariances $\langle \delta_{i\beta} T_{ij}^{(s)} \delta_{i'\beta'} T_{i'j'}^{(s)} \rangle \propto \delta_{\beta\beta'}$, we readily obtain that the spin conductances vanish on average, $\langle G_j^{(s)}(j) \rangle = 0$. They nevertheless fluctuate from sample to sample upon global homogeneous variation of the electrochemical potentials, and we thus calculate var $G_j^{(s)}(j)$.

$$\text{var} T_{ij}^{(0)} = \frac{4N_j (N_j - N_i - 1)}{N_T (2N_T - 1)(2N_T - 3)},$$

(9a)

$$\text{var} T_{ij}^{(s)} = \frac{4N_j (N_j - N_i)}{(2N_T - 1)(2N_T - 3)},$$

(9b)

$$\text{var} = \frac{\left( \frac{T_{ij}^{(0)}}{2N_T - 1} \right)^{\frac{N_T}{2N_T - 1}}}{N_T - 1},$$

(9c)

from which we obtain

$$\text{var} G_j^{(s)}(j) = \frac{e^2}{h^2} \frac{4N_j (N_j - N_i - 1)}{N_T (2N_T - 1)(2N_T - 3)},$$

(10a)

$$\text{var} G_j^{(s)}(j) \simeq \text{var} G_j^{(s)}(j) + \frac{e^2}{h^2} \frac{4N_j^2 (N_i - 1)}{N_T (2N_T - 1)(2N_T - 3)(N_T - 1)}.$$  

(10b)
To obtain equation (10b), we once again noted that 
\[ \langle \delta T_j^{(0)} \delta T_k^{(0)} \rangle \propto \delta_{j,k} \] and neglected the subdominant fluctuations of \( T_j^{(0)} / (2N_i - T_1^{(0)}) \). The second term in this equation is a leading order approximation in \( N_i^{-1} \). One can show, however, that it is always significantly smaller than \( \varapprox G_i^{(1)}(j) \), for any \( N_i \), so that the small deviations from equation (10b) possibly occurring for a small number of channels do not alter our conclusions. We see that, while the conductance across electrodes 2 and 3 vanishes on RMT average, it exhibits sample-to-sample fluctuations. These fluctuations are universal in the common mesoscopic sense that they remain the same if the number of channels carried by all leads is homogeneously rescaled. For a given sample, the conductance is thus finite and can be approximated by its typical value \( \approx \text{rms} \ G_i^{(1)}(j), i = 1, 2. \) In this paper we used the definitions of equations (5) and (6) that spin conductances are given by the ratio of a charge current with a spin accumulation. Converted into more standardly used units of spin conductance, and for a symmetric cavity with \( N_i = N_i' = 1, \forall i \), equation (10a) predicts a typical spin conductance of \( \text{rms} \ G_i^{(1)} \propto (\delta V / e h) \rightarrow (\delta V / e 4n) \).

Instead of measuring \( I_{2,3} \) for \( V_{2,3} = 0 \), one can alternatively tune \( V_{2,3} \) such that the currents vanish. Going back to equation (1), one obtains that the potential difference \( \delta V_2 \equiv \langle V_2(m) - V_2(-m) \rangle \) satisfies

\[ e \delta V_2 = 2 \sum_{\beta \beta'} \frac{T_{31}^{(0)}(\beta)}{H_{1}(\beta)} \times \left[ 2N_2 - T_{22}^{(0)} - T_{23}^{(0)} + \frac{2N_2 - T_{22}^{(0)} + T_{23}^{(0)}}{2N_3 - T_{33}^{(0)} + T_{23}^{(0)}} \right]^{-1}. \] (11)

For small numbers of channels per lead, say \( N_i \lesssim 5 \), equation (11) gives a voltage response similar in magnitude to the spin accumulation in reservoir 1. In 2DEG/2DHG, a response in the range \( \sim 0.1-1 \) mV typically requires a spin accumulation of the order of 0.001–0.1 eV, with 0.1–1% of polarized electrons, depending on the material. This is certain achievable via optical pumping, where polarization of significant fractions of the electronic gas has been demonstrated [32], and is reasonably expectable for ferromagnetic injection, based on polarizations obtained in bulk semiconductors [22].

Experimental measurements of the Rashba parameter in InAs-based 2DEG [33] give a ratio of the spin–orbit splitting to Fermi energy of the order of 5 meV/100 meV = 1/20. Given a carrier concentration of \( n_c = 2 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2} \), we estimate that the Edelstein mechanism [24] would produce polarizations of the order of 0.1–1% in a 0.2 \( \mu \text{m} \) wide strip of InAs-based 2DEG carrying a current of about 2000 nA. Therefore the spin to charge current conversion discussed in this paper should lead to measurable charge voltage differences.

In conclusion, we have discussed how spin currents or spin accumulations can be converted mesoscopically to charge currents and voltages using neither ferromagnets nor external magnetic fields. We have proposed an experimental method, based on this spin–charge conversion, to measure the spin conductance of mesoscopic cavities—giving the charge current generated solely by the presence of spin–orbit interaction—relaying solely on measuring electrical signals. The spin conductance of a mesoscopic cavity might in principle be measured using spin polarized quantum point contacts [34]. However, the Zeeman field necessary to polarize the quantum point contact is rather large. It might thus freeze the spin of the electrons and reduce or even destroy spin–orbit effects inside the cavity. The set-up we propose does not suffer from this. We do not see any unsurmountable difficulty preventing the experimental implementation of the ideas presented here.

**Acknowledgments**

This work has been partially supported by the National Science Foundation under grant no. DMR–0706319 and by the German science foundation DFG under grants SFB689 and GRK638. We would like to thank R Leturcq who gave us the initial motivation to work out these ideas and D Weiss for discussions. PJ thanks the Physics Department of the Universities of Basel and Regensburg for their kind hospitality in the final stages of this project.

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