Nuclear Spin Switch in Semiconductor Quantum Dots

A.I. Tartakovskii¹, T. Wright¹, A. Russell², V.I. Fal’ko², A. B. Van’kov¹, J. Skiba-Szymanska¹, I. Drouzas¹, R.S. Kolodka¹, M.S. Skolnick¹, P.W. Fry³, A. Tahraoui³, H.-Y. Liu³, M. Hopkinson³

¹ Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of Sheffield, S3 7RH, UK
² Department of Physics, University of Lancaster, Lancaster LA1 4YB, UK
³ Department of Electronic and Electrical Engineering, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S1 3JD, UK

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We show that by illuminating an InGaAs/GaAs self-assembled quantum dot with circularly polarized light, the nuclei of atoms constituting the dot can be driven into a bistable regime, in which either a threshold-like enhancement or reduction of the local nuclear field by up to 3 Tesla can be generated by varying the intensity of light. The excitation power threshold for such a nuclear spin “switch” is found to depend on both external magnetic and electric fields. The switch is shown to arise from the strong feedback of the nuclear spin polarization on the dynamics of spin transfer from electrons to the nuclei of the dot.

The hyperfine interaction in solids [1] arises from the coupling between the magnetic dipole moments of nuclear and electron spins. It produces two dynamical effects: (i) inelastic relaxation of electron spin via the “flip-flop” process (Fig.1a) and (ii) the Overhauser shift of the electron energy [2]. Recently, the hyperfine interaction in semiconductor quantum dots (QDs) has attracted close attention [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14] fuelled by proposals for QD implementation in quantum information applications [15]. The full quantization of the electron states in QDs is beneficial for removing decoherence mechanisms present in extended systems [16, 17]. However, the electron localization results in a stronger (than in a bulk material) overlap of its wave-function with a large number of nuclei ($N \sim 10^4$ in small self-assembled InGaAs/GaAs dots and up to $10^5 \div 10^6$ in electrostatically-defined GaAs QDs), and the resulting hyperfine interaction with nuclear spins has been found to dominate the decoherence [3, 4, 5, 12, 13, 14] and life-time [4] of the electron spin at low temperatures.

In this Letter, we report the observation of a pronounced bistable behaviour of nuclear spin polarisation, $S$, in optically pumped self-assembled InGaAs/GaAs QDs. In our experiments, spin-polarized electrons are introduced one-by-one into an individual InGaAs dot at a rate $w_x$ (see Fig.1b) by the circularly polarized optical excitation of electron-hole pairs 120 meV above the lowest QD energy states. Due to hole spin-flip during its energy relaxation, both bright and dark excitons can form in the dot ground state. The former will quickly recombine radiatively with a rate $w_{rec} \approx 10^9$ sec$^{-1}$, whereas the dark exciton can recombine with simultaneous spin transfer to a nucleus via a spin “flip-flop” process (as in Fig.1a) at the rate $w_{rec} N p_{hf}$ [12, 13]. Here $N$ is the number of nuclei interacting with the electron and $p_{hf}$ is the probability of a “flip-flop” process, which from our perturbation theory treatment is given by:

$$p_{hf} = |h_{hf}|^2/(E_{eZ}^2 + 1/4\gamma^2). \quad (1)$$

Here $\gamma$ is the exciton life-time broadening, $h_{hf}$ is the strength of the hyperfine interaction of the electron with a single nucleus and $E_{eZ}$ is the electron Zeeman splitting. $E_{eZ}$ is strongly dependent on the effective nuclear magnetic field $B_N$ generated by the nuclei. This provides a feedback mechanism between the spin transfer rate and the degree of nuclear polarization ($B_N \propto S$) in the dot [19]. The feedback gives rise to bistability in the nuclear polarization and threshold-like transitions between the spin states of $10^4$ nuclei leading to abrupt changes of $B_N$ by up to 3T in few nanometre sized QDs.

We observe such threshold-like transitions (referred to below as a nuclear spin ‘switch’) in several different structures containing self-assembled InGaAs/GaAs QD with

FIG. 1: (a) Schematic representation of the electron-nuclear spin “flip-flop” process. (b) The steps involved in nuclear polarization of a quantum dot (see text for detail). (c) $X^0$ photoluminescence spectra recorded for an individual InGaAs QD in an external magnetic field $B = 2T$ at $T = 15K$. The spectrum excited with $\sigma^+$ ($\sigma^-$) light resonant with the wetting layer is plotted in blue (red). The horizontal arrows show the corresponding exciton Zeeman splittings.
which gives rise to the Overhauser field dependence is a signature of dynamic nuclear polarization excitation, respectively. The dependence of exciton PL at $B=2.5T$ for $\sigma^+$ and $\sigma^-$ excitation polarizations.

$\sim3\times20\times20$ nm size. Below, we present results obtained at a temperature of 15K for two GaAs/AlGaAs Schottky diodes, where the dots are grown in the intrinsic region of the device. In these structures a bias can be applied permitting control of the vertical electric field, $F$ [20]. For photoluminescence (PL) experiments, individual dots are isolated using 800 nm apertures in a gold shadow mask on the sample surface.

Fig.1c shows time-averaged (60s) PL spectra recorded for a neutral exciton in a single QD in an external magnetic field of 2T. Circularly polarized laser excitation in the low energy tail of the wetting layer (at 1.425eV) is employed and unpolarized PL from the dot is detected using a double spectrometer and a CCD. For each excitation polarization a spectrum consisting of an exciton Zeeman doublet is measured with the high (low) energy component dominating when $\sigma^+$ ($\sigma^-$) polarization is used. A strong dependence of the exciton Zeeman splitting ($E_{xZ}$) on the polarization of the excitation is observed in Fig.1c: $E_{xZ}(\sigma^+)=260\mu$eV and $E_{xZ}(\sigma^-)=150\mu$eV. Such a dependence is a signature of dynamic nuclear polarization [3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11], which gives rise to the Overhauser field $B_N$ aligned parallel or anti-parallel to $B$ for $\sigma^+$ or $\sigma^-$ excitation, respectively.

The dependence of exciton PL at $B = 2.5T$ on the power, $P \propto w_z$, of $\sigma^-$ excitation is shown in the grey-scale plot in Fig.2a. At low $P$ the Zeeman splitting $E_{xZ} = 310\mu$eV. As the power is increased, a threshold-like decrease of $E_{xZ}$ to 225$\mu$eV is observed at $P = P_{tr}$ indicating the sudden appearance of a large nuclear field. Fig.2b shows the power dependence of $E_{xZ}$ measured at $B = 2T$ for both circular polarizations of incident light. For $\sigma^-$ excitation, $E_{xZ}$ decreases below the threshold followed by a weak power dependence above the threshold. The $\sigma^-$ behaviour contrasts the weak monotonic increase of $E_{xZ}$ seen for $\sigma^+$ excitation over the whole range of powers similar to that reported in Ref. [21].

The variation of the Zeeman splitting in Fig.2 reflects the change in the nuclear field $B_N$: $E_{xZ}(\sigma^\pm) = |g_e + g_N|\mu_B B \pm |g_e|\mu_B B_N(\sigma^\pm)$ (where $g_e$ is the electron g-factor [22], $\mu_B$ is the Bohr magneton). $B_N$ in its turn depends on the external field $B$. Triangles in Fig.3 show the difference between $E_{xZ}(\sigma^-)$ at low and high powers (squares and circles in Fig.3a, respectively), $\Delta E_N = |g_e|\mu_B B_N(\sigma^-)$, as a function of $B$. $\Delta E_N$ increases linearly with $B$ at low fields and then saturates at $B \approx 2.5/3T$. The inset in Fig.3 shows that the threshold-power for the switch also increases nearly linearly with $B$. No switch could be observed at $B > 3T$ in the range of powers employed in our studies.

For $B < 3T$, when the excitation power was gradually reduced from powers above the switch, $E_{xZ}$ was found to vary weakly with power until another threshold was reached, where the magnitude of the exciton Zeeman
splitting abruptly increased (at $P = P_{\text{down}}$), as shown in Fig. 4. This increase of $E_{xZ}$ corresponds to depolarization of the nuclei and hence reduction of $B_N$. The observed hysteresis of nuclear polarization shows that two significantly different and stable nuclear spin configurations can exist for the same external parameters of magnetic field and excitation power. We find that high nuclear polarization persists at low excitation powers for more than 15 min, this time most likely being determined by the stability of the experimental set-up.

We also show in Figs. 4a,b that the size of the hysteresis loop depends on the external magnetic or electric fields (the electric field is given by $F = (V_{\text{rec}} + 0.7V)/d$, where $V_{\text{rec}}$ is the applied reverse bias and $d = 230nm$ is the width of the undoped region of the device). The inset in Fig. 4b shows the $P_{\text{up}}$ reverse bias-dependence. In general, both $P_{\text{up}}$ and $P_{\text{down}}$ increase with $B$ and reverse bias, but also the difference between the two thresholds increases, leading to a broader range of indent powers in which the bistability occurs. The threshold bias dependence arises from the influence of the electric field on the charge state of the dot $[21]$, and will be discussed elsewhere.

In order to explain the nuclear switching and bistability, we employ a model based on spin-flip assisted e-h recombination $[12, 18]$. We assume that the electron spin is defined by the sign of the circularly polarized excitation ($\sigma^\pm$), whereas the hole spin is partially randomized during the energy relaxation. Thus, dark and bright excitons can be formed in the dot ground state, with the rates $\alpha w_x$ and $(1 - \alpha) w_x$, respectively. A bright exciton recombines with the rate $w_{\text{rec}}$ without spin transfer to the nuclei. In contrast, a dark exciton can recombine with the electron simultaneously flipping its spin due to the hyperfine interaction: the electron virtually occupies a spin equal to that of the nucleus, with the electron simultaneously flipping its spin due to the hyperfine interaction. The spin transfer to nuclei at a rate $w_s$ is given by Eq. (1) depends on the electron Zeeman splitting, $E_{xZ} = g_e \mu_B [B \pm B_N (\sigma^\pm)]$. For the case of $\sigma^-$ excitation, polarization of the nuclei leads to a decrease of $E_{xZ}$, and thus a positive feedback and speeding up of the spin transfer process: the more spin is transferred to the nuclear system the faster becomes the spin transfer rate. By contrast for $\sigma^+$ excitation, spin transfer leads to an increase of $E_{xZ}$, leading to the saturation of $S$ and $B_N$ at high power.

The spin transfer to nuclei at a rate $w_s \propto \alpha w_x N p_{hf}$ competes with nuclear depolarization, $\dot{S} = -w_{\text{dep}} S$ (see Fig.1b) due to spin diffusion away from the dot into the surrounding GaAs $[23, 24]$, at a rate $w_{\text{dep}} \sim 1 - 10^{-11}$s$^{-1}$. At high power of $\sigma^-$ excitation $w_s$ may exceed $w_{\text{dep}}$ and then a stimulated nuclear polarization transfer will take place due to the positive feedback mechanism described above leading to an abrupt increase of the nuclear spin (at $P = P_{\text{up}}$). To achieve the condition $w_s = w_{\text{dep}}$ a higher $w_x$ (power) will be required at higher $B$ in agreement with observation in the inset of Fig. 3. The stimulation at $P \approx P_{\text{up}}$ stops when either (i) $|E_{xZ}|$ starts increasing again since $B_N > B$, causing reduction of $w_s$, or (ii) the maximum achievable $B_N = B_N^{\text{max}}$ in the given dot is reached. This explains the dependence in Fig. 3, where $\Delta E_{xZ}$, and hence the nuclear field, increases at low $B$ and saturates at high fields, from which we estimate $B_N^{\text{max}} \approx 2.5 - 3T$ $[25]$. When the power is reduced from beyond the threshold $P_{\text{up}}$, and the condition $w_s < w_{\text{dep}}$ is reached at sufficiently low $w_x$, a strong negative feedback is expected: further nuclear depolarization will lead to even lower $w_s$ due to the increase in the electron Zeeman energy $E_{xZ}$. Thus, an abrupt nuclear depolarization will take place (at the threshold $P_{\text{down}}$). This explains the observed hysteresis behavior in Fig. 4, and also accounts for the existence of a bistable state in the nuclear polarization at intermediate powers, $P_{\text{down}} < P < P_{\text{up}}$.

To model this bistability, we solve the rate equations for the nuclear spin polarization $S$, and populations of bright and dark excitons, $n_b$ and $n_d$, $(1 - n_b - n_d)$ is the probability that the dot is empty:

$$\dot{S} = n_d w_{\text{rec}} p_{hf} (1 - S) - w_{\text{dep}} S,$$

$$\dot{n_b} = (1 - \alpha) w_x [1 - n_b - n_d] - w_{\text{rec}} n_b,$$
\[ n_d = \alpha w_x [1 - n_b - n_d] - \frac{1}{2}(1 - S)Nw_{rec} \rho_B f n_d. \]

In the limit \( \gamma \ll |g_e\mu_B B_{N}^{\text{max}} \) we obtain the following equation for a steady state polarization induced by the \( \sigma^\pm \) excitation:

\[ f(S, b) \equiv S \left[ 1 + b \frac{(x \pm S)^2}{1 - S} \right] = a, \quad x = \frac{B}{B_{N}^{\text{max}}}, \quad (2) \]

where for \( w_x \ll w_{rec} \) (low occupancy of the dot)

\[ a = 2\alpha w_x / N w_{dep}, \quad b = 2\alpha N w_x / w_{rec}. \quad (3) \]

In Eq. (3), both \( a \) and \( b \) are proportional to the excitation power. For low excitation powers such that \( b \ll 1 \), both \( \sigma^+ \) and \( \sigma^- \) excitation, Eq. (2) has a single solution for the degree of nuclear polarization, namely \( S \approx a \). In the \( \sigma^+ \) excitation case, \( f(S, b) \) has three solutions, two of which are stable with an unstable one in between.

We find that the occurrence of the switch to \( S > x \) depends on the dimensionless ratio \( \theta = a/b = w_{rec}/N^2 w_{dep} \). Since at small \( \theta \), \( a \) will grow more slowly with \( w_x \) than the magnitude of \( f(S, b) \) at the local maximum. \( \theta \) is determined by the dot parameters only, and can be estimated for the dots studied in our experiment: we obtain \( \theta_{exp} \sim 1.10 \) from \( w_{rec} \sim 10^9 \) sec\(^{-1} \), \( w_{dep} \sim 1.1 \times 10^8 \) sec\(^{-1} \) and \( N \sim 10^4 \). Using Eq. (2) we find that for \( x \leq 0.8 \) the spin switch is possible for any \( \theta_{exp} > \theta_c \), where \( \theta_c = (3 - \sqrt{9 - 8x})/(1 + \sqrt{9 - 8x}) \leq 0.1 \), consistent with our observations. A hysteresis loop calculated using Eq. (2) for \( x = 0.7 \) (with \( \theta_c \approx 0.07 \)) and \( \theta = 0.1 \) (close to critical \( \theta_c \)), is shown in Fig. 4d.

To summarize, we have observed a strong optically induced bistability of the nuclear spin polarization in self-assembled InGaAs QDs. We show that nuclear magnetic fields up to 3T can be switched on and off in individual dots by varying one of three external controlling parameters: electric and magnetic fields and intensity of circularly polarized excitation. We have found that the nuclear spin switch effect is a general phenomenon and has been observed in several different InGaAs/GaAs quantum dot samples at temperatures \( T = 15 - 30 \)K and in the range of external magnetic fields \( B = 1 \pm 3 \)T. The effect arises due to the strong feedback of the nuclear spin polarization on the dynamics of the electron-nuclear spin interaction accompanying the radiative recombination process, which is enhanced when the Overhauser and external magnetic fields cancel each other.

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[25] Note that a close value of \( B_N \) was deduced from the dependence of \( \Delta E_n(B) \) using \( |g_e| \approx 0.5 \).