Quantum dissociation of a vortex-antivortex pair in a long Josephson junction

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We report a theoretical analysis and experimental observation of the quantum dynamics of a single vortex-antivortex (VAV) pair confined in a long narrow annular Josephson junction. The switching of the junction from the superconducting state to the resistive state occurs via the dissociation of a pinned VAV pair. The pinning potential is controlled by external magnetic field \( H \) and dc bias current \( I \). We predict a specific magnetic field dependence of the oscillatory energy levels of the pinned VAV state and the crossover to a macroscopic quantum tunneling mechanism of VAV dissociation at low temperatures. Our analysis explains the experimentally observed increase of the width of the switching current distribution \( P(I) \) with \( H \) and the crossover to the quantum regime at the temperature of about 100 mK.

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Great attention has been devoted to the experimental and theoretical study of macroscopic quantum phenomena in diverse Josephson coupled systems. Most of these systems, e.g. dc biased single Josephson junctions (JJ), various SQUIDs and small Josephson junction arrays, contain a few lumped Josephson junctions, hence, they can be described by a few degrees of freedom (Josephson phases). At low temperature quantum-mechanical effects such as macroscopic tunneling, energy levels quantization, and coherent oscillations of the Josephson phase have been observed.

As we turn to spatially extended Josephson systems, including quasi-one-dimensional long Josephson junctions, parallel arrays and Josephson junction ladders, which present a particular case of interacting many particle systems, the analysis and observation of macroscopic quantum dynamics is more complex. These systems can support diverse nonlinear excitations, such as Josephson vortices (magnetic fluxons) and vortex-antivortex (VAV) pairs, which interact with inhomogeneities and linear (Josephson plasma) modes. The classical dynamics of such excitations is well established, and in particular, the thermal fluctuation induced escape of a Josephson phase from the metastable state has been studied. It is necessary to stress that, while various macroscopic quantum-mechanical effects have been predicted, only few of them were observed in experiments. In particular, studying the Josephson phase escape from the metastable state, the macroscopic quantum tunneling of a state with many vortices has been observed, and recently tunneling of a single vortex and its energy level quantization have been measured.

After the quantum dynamics of a single vortex, the next step in the study of macroscopic quantum effects is the dynamics of a single vortex-antivortex pair. States containing many VAV pairs are relevant to thin superconducting films or large two-dimensional Josephson arrays close to the Kosterlitz-Thouless transition. A single VAV pair naturally appears in a long annular JJ placed in the external magnetic field \( H \) parallel to the junction plane (Fig. 1). In this Letter, we report a theoretical analysis and experimental observation of quantum-mechanical effects in the dynamics of a single vortex-antivortex pair. We show that in the presence of an externally applied magnetic field \( H \) a single VAV pair can be nucleated in a long JJ. A pair is confined in a potential well created by externally applied magnetic field and dc bias current. Fluctuations, thermal and quantum, induce the internal oscillations of the pair. The switching of the JJ from the superconducting state to the resistive state occurs by dissociation of a pinned pair. At high temperature the dissociation takes place in a form of thermal activation over the barrier. At low temperature there occurs macroscopic quantum tunneling through the barrier.

First, we quantitatively analyze the penetration and following dissociation of a VAV pair in the presence of a small magnetic field \( H \) and a large dc bias, namely \( \delta = \frac{I_{c0} - I}{I_{c0}} \ll 1 \), where \( I_{c0} \) is the critical current of a long JJ in for \( H = 0 \). In this case the Josephson phase is written as \( \varphi(x, t) = \frac{\pi}{2} + \xi(x, t) \), where a small variable part \( \xi(x, t) \ll 1 \) satisfies the equation:

\[
\xi_{tt} - \xi_{xx} - \frac{\xi^2}{2} = -\delta - \hbar \cos \left( \frac{2\pi x}{L} \right),
\]

where \( L \) is the junction length, and \( \hbar \propto H \) is the normalized external magnetic field. Here, coordinate \( x \) and time \( t \) are normalized to the Josephson penetration length \( \lambda_J \) and the inverse plasma frequency \( \omega_p^{-1} \), respectively. A particular solution of this equation satisfying the bound-
The critical current in the presence of an external magnetic field is found by minimization of the energy $E(A)$ in $A$. Then, the critical current is found as the bias current at which the static solution disappears, which assumes that (in the absence of fluctuations) the confined pair dissociates into a set of free vortex and antivortex moving in opposite directions. After some algebra, the critical current is found to be $\delta c(h) = 2h/3$, and the corresponding critical value $A_0$ of $A$ being determined by the condition $\sinh((2\delta)^{1/4}/A_0) = 1$. Note that the critical current decreases linearly with the magnetic field, in contrast to the case of linear long JJs, where similar consideration yields $\delta c(h) \propto h^{1/3}$. Both results are valid for the ideal uniform bias-current distribution and $L/2\pi \gg 1$.

Next, we performed direct numerical simulations for the finite length JJ. The numerically found magnetic field dependence of the critical current is shown in Fig. 1d (dotted line). The simulations clearly show the nucleation and subsequent dissociation of the VAV pair (see, Fig. 1c). However, there is a discrepancy between the analysis and numerics in the values of $I_c$ (see, Fig. 1d). Analysis and numerics are in a good accord as the length of a Josephson junction is increased, $L \geq 20$. The lower branch of the critical current (see Fig. 1d (circles)) corresponds to the penetration of a well separated vortex and antivortex in the junction ($A \simeq L/2$). The quantum dynamics of such a state will be discussed elsewhere.

In the presence of thermal or quantum fluctuations the dissociation of the pinned VAV pair occurs at a random value of dc bias, i.e. at $\delta \geq \delta c(h)$. Assuming weak fluctuations, $\delta - \delta c(h) \ll \delta c(h)$, we expand the energy of the state around $A = A_0 \delta A = A_0 - A_0$ as

$$E(A) = \frac{\chi h^5/4}{2} \left(\delta A\right)^2 + \frac{3h^2/2}{2} (\delta - \delta c(h))(\delta A) - \frac{h^2}{6} (\delta A)^3,$$

where $\chi$ is the numerical coefficient of order one. Thus, the problem of fluctuation induced dissociation of a confined VAV pair is mapped to a well known problem of

\begin{align*}
\xi(x, t) &= 0 \text{ at } x = \pm\infty \text{ is written in the form}
\xi(x, t) &= \sqrt{2\delta} \left[ \frac{3}{\cosh^2 \left( \frac{2}{2} \right)} - 1 \right].
\end{align*}
particles escape from a cubic potential. The probability of the dissociation depends on the height of the effective potential barrier

$$U_{\text{eff}}(\delta) = 2 \cdot 3^{5/4} h^{-1/4} (\delta - \delta_c(h))^{3/2}.$$  \hspace{1cm} (6)

At high temperatures, the dissociation is driven by thermal activation over this barrier. Using the known theory describing the particle escape from such a potential well, we find the switching rate of a long Josephson junction from the superconducting state to the resistive state, $\Gamma_T(I)$,

$$\Gamma_T(I) \propto \exp\left[ - \frac{2 \cdot 3^{5/4} h^{-1/4} (\delta - \delta_c(h))^{3/2}}{k_B T} \right]. \hspace{1cm} (7)$$

Thus, at high temperature the standard deviation of the critical current $\sigma$ should increase with temperature and weakly depends on the magnetic field: $\sigma_T \propto T^{2/3} h^{1/6}$. Notice that $\sigma_T$ increases with $H$, in contrast to the behavior of a small Josephson junction where $\sigma_T \propto (I_c(H))^{1/3}$ decreases with $H$.

At low temperatures the dissociation of the VAV pair occurs through a *macroscopic quantum tunneling* process. Such a quantum regime is realized at $T < T_{cr}$, where the crossover temperature $T_{cr}$ is determined by the frequency $\omega(\delta)$ of small oscillations of VAV pair, $T_{cr} \sim \frac{h \omega(\delta)}{2 \pi k_B}$. In the quantum regime the frequency $\omega(\delta) = \frac{3^{1/8}}{\sqrt{8}} (\delta - \delta_c(h))^{1/4}$ determines the oscillatory energy levels $E_n (n = 0, 1, 2...)$ of the pinned VAV state, $E_n \sim \hbar \omega(\delta)(n + 1/2)$.

Neglecting the dissipative effects, in the quantum regime the switching rate $\Gamma_Q(I)$ of the under-barrier dissociation can be estimated, as usual, in the WKB approximation, which yields

$$\Gamma_Q(I) \propto e^{\frac{36 U_{\text{eff}}(\delta)}{5 \hbar \omega(\delta)}} = \exp\left[ \frac{36 \sqrt{\hbar} h^{-1/4} (\delta - \delta_c(h))^{5/4}}{5 \cdot 3^{3/8} \hbar} \right]. \hspace{1cm} (8)$$

In this limit the standard deviation of the critical current $\sigma$ is independent of temperature and, (similar to the high temperature case), it weakly increases with magnetic field: $\sigma_Q \propto h^{1/5}$.

Notice, that the process described above of the penetration and subsequent dissociation of the VAV pair is based on an assumption that the pair size is small with respect to the JJ length. We find that the Josephson phase escape in the form of the dissociation of the pair occurs (in normalized units) as $h \geq \frac{3}{4} (L/2)^{-4}$. In the opposite limit of very small magnetic field $h \lesssim (L/2)^{-4}$ the Josephson phase escape occurs homogeneously in a whole junction 18.

The analysis presented above is valid for small magnetic fields, $h \ll 1$. As the magnetic field $h$ increases, the critical current $I_c(h)$ is suppressed, and only a qualitative description of the VAV pair dissociation can be carried out. In the general case the pair size is $l_b \approx (1 - (I_c/h_c)^{2})^{-1/4}$ (instead of $l_b \approx \delta^{-1/4}$ that is valid for $h \ll 1$), and the amplitude of the state is $\xi_b \approx \arccos(I_c/h_c) \quad \text{(instead of $\xi_b \approx \sqrt{\delta}$)}$. Following a similar procedure as above (see, Eqs. 3 and 4) we obtain the standard deviation dominated by thermal fluctuations

$$\sigma_T \approx \frac{T^{2/3} h^{2/3}}{\arccos\left(\frac{L_c(h)}{l_c} \right)}, \hspace{1cm} (9)$$

and in the quantum regime

$$\sigma_Q \approx \frac{\hbar}{\arccos\left(\frac{L_c(h)}{l_c} \right)^{8/5}}. \hspace{1cm} (10)$$

The standard deviation is determined by the magnetic field dependence of the critical current $I_c(h)$ that is given implicitly by equation (this dependence is shown in Fig. 1d by a dashed line):

$$h = \frac{3}{4} \sqrt{(1 - (I_c(h)/l_c)^2)} \arccos\left(\frac{L_c(h)}{l_c} \right). \hspace{1cm} (11)$$

A most important consequence of this analysis is the saturation of $\sigma_T(Q)$ at moderate magnetic fields. The calculated dependencies $\sigma_T(Q)(h)$ are shown in Fig. 3 by dashed lines.
Next, we turn to an experimental study of Josephson phase escape in long annular JJs subject to an in-plane magnetic field. The junction of diameter $d = 100 \mu m$ and width $w = 0.5 \mu m$ was etched from a sputtered Nb/AlO$_x$/Nb thin film trilayer and patterned using electron-beam lithography. Having a relatively small junction width $w$ is essential for the observation of quantum effects, as the effective mass given by Eq. (4) (in natural units) is proportional to $w$. The critical current density of the junction was about 220 A/cm$^2$. The magnetic field dependence displays a peculiar dependence of the switching current distribution $P(I)$, see Fig. 1d. The magnetic field dependence of the critical current displays a linear decrease in a broad range of magnetic fields, which is consistent with the analysis presented above.

We have measured the temperature and magnetic field dependence of the switching current distribution $P(I)$, see Fig. 2. The details of measurements have been discussed elsewhere [4, 10, 11]. As shown in Fig. 2, the width of distribution $\sigma$ decreases with temperature and saturates below 100 mK. This behavior indicates that at low temperatures the VAV dissociation in the quantum regime is observed.

For each temperature, the distribution width $\sigma$ has a minimum at zero magnetic field. Its magnetic field dependence displays a peculiar increase and a following saturation with magnetic field, see Fig. 3, both in thermal and quantum regimes. This behavior is characteristic for fluctuation induced dissociation of the VAV state. The $\sigma(h)$ dependence is in a qualitative agreement with the theoretical analysis given by Eqs. (9) and (10).

In conclusion, we have shown that in the presence of a magnetic field the switching of a long Josephson junction from the superconducting state to the resistive one occurs through the nucleation and subsequent dissociation of a single vortex-antivortex pair. At low temperatures we observe the pair dissociation, in the form of the tunneling under the barrier, in the direct experiment. The oscillatory energy levels of the pair can be further studied experimentally by applying an external resonant microwave radiation, similar to the case of a single Josephson vortex trapped in long Josephson junction [15, 16].

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![Graph showing the standard deviation $\sigma$ of $P(I)$ distribution versus magnetic field $H$ in the temperature range between 40 mK and 4.0 K: experiment (dots), theory (dashed lines).](image)

FIG. 3: Standard deviation $\sigma$ of $P(I)$ distribution versus magnetic field $H$ in the temperature range between 40 mK and 4.0 K: experiment (dots), theory (dashed lines).
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