Gate-tunable negative refraction of mid-infrared polaritons

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Negative refraction provides a platform to manipulate mid-infrared and terahertz radiation for molecular sensing and thermal emission applications. However, its implementation based on metamaterials and plasmonic media presents challenges with optical losses, limited spatial confinement, and lack of active tunability in this spectral range. We demonstrate gate-tunable negative refraction at mid-infrared frequencies using hybrid topological polaritons in van der Waals heterostructures. Specifically, we visualize wide-angle negatively refracted polaritons in α-MoO₃ films partially decorated with graphene, undergoing reversible planar nanoscale focusing. Our atomically thick heterostructures weaken scattering losses at the interface while enabling an actively tunable transition of normal to negative refraction through electrical gating. We propose polaritonic negative refraction as a promising platform for infrared applications such as electrically tunable super-resolution imaging, nanoscale thermal manipulation, enhanced molecular sensing, and on-chip optical circuity.

Results and discussion

We demonstrate deep subwavelength mid-infrared negative refraction by constructing a vdW heterostructure consisting of an α-MoO₃ film partially covered by monolayer graphene. Phonon polaritons (PhPs) in α-MoO₃ exhibit in-plane hyperbolic dispersion in the Reststrahlen band II from 816 to 972 cm⁻¹, where the permittivity components along the [100], [001], and [010] crystal directions satisfy εₓ<0, εᵧ>0, and εz>0, respectively (25–28) (note S1 and fig. S1). By contrast, graphene supports highly confined isotropic plasmons in this spectral region (29, 30), such that anisotropic hyperbolic PhPs in the α-MoO₃ couple to graphene plasmons and results in an optical topological transition that allows us to flexibly engineer dispersion and isofrequency contours (IFCs) (31–34) (fig. S2).

By conserving the polariton wave vector along the direction of the interface (i.e., the normal to the interface, θ₁ and θ₂, respectively, as well as wave vectors k₁ and k₂, respectively, as well as incidence and refraction angles φ₁ and φ₂ of the corresponding Poynting vectors S₁ and S₂, respectively. Angles are defined as positive (negative) on the upside (downside) of the direction normal to the interface.

![Fig. 1. Negative refraction of polaritons in two dimensions. (A) Schematics of the device. (B) IFCs of polaritons in hyperbolic (α-MoO₃) and elliptic (graphene/α-MoO₃) media. Negative refraction takes place at the interface between the two media as a result of conservation of the tangential wave vector. We define incidence and refraction angles θ₁ and θ₂ of the polaritons with wave vectors k₁ and k₂, respectively, as well as incidence and refraction angles φ₁ and φ₂ of the corresponding Poynting vectors S₁ and S₂, respectively. Angles are defined as positive (negative) on the upside (downside) of the direction normal to the interface.](image-url)
graphene edge), negative refraction is shown to take place when polaritons traverse the in-plane interface between the two regions (Fig. 1A). The Poynting vector $S$ (directed along the energy flow, which is normal to the IFC) and the wave vector $k$ are not collinear for noncircular IFCs (fig. S3 and note S2), such as those of hyperbolic polaritons in $\alpha$-MoO$_3$ (Fig. 1B) (35). Because the boundary conditions at the interface (between $\alpha$-MoO$_3$ with and without covering graphene) only require conservation of the tangential wave vector component $k_\parallel = k \sin \theta$, where $\theta$ is the angle between the wave vector and the direction normal to the interface, the refracted wave can exhibit normal (positive) refraction for $k$, but negative refraction for $S$ (with $S_\parallel = S \sin \varphi$, where $\varphi$ is the angle between the Poynting vector and the interface normal). Additional explanations regarding negative refraction are shown in fig. S4.

Negative refraction transforms the linear interface into a lens capable of focusing at a position determined from the relation between incidence and refraction angles, which can in turn be obtained by inspecting the distribution of the $x$-$z$ component of the Dyadic Green function in real space and then comparing the Poynting vector $S$ to the IFCs (see details in fig. S5 and note S3). Notably, because the IFCs possess inversion symmetry with respect to the graphene edge, negative refraction occurs reversibly when crossing the interface in both directions (i.e., to or from bare $\alpha$-MoO$_3$).

For an experimental demonstration of negative refraction, we fabricated a gold antenna on one side of the interface (fig. S6) to serve as an excitation source of polaritons. Features of negative refraction are revealed by a scattering-type scanning near-field optical microscope equipped with a tunable quantum cascade laser (36, 37). When hyperbolic PhPs are launched on the bare $\alpha$-MoO$_3$ side and propagate toward the region covered by graphene, negative refraction occurs and the transmitted concave wavefront is observed to shrink sharply (Fig. 2, A and C). The focal point is situated at the fringe with the smallest full width at half maximum (FWHM, the fifth fringe), yielding foci of FWHM as small as 373 nm (i.e., 1/30 of the free-space light wavelength) (Fig. 2E, right panel). After passing the focal spot, the wavefront begins to spread slightly in a diffractive fashion (sixth and higher order fringes).

We also demonstrate negative refraction when reversing the propagation direction by placing the launching antenna on the graphene/$\alpha$-MoO$_3$ side (fig. S7), so that the diverging elliptic polaritons in such a medium are transmitted into converging hyperbolic PhPs in bare $\alpha$-MoO$_3$ (Fig. 2, B and D), and a tightly squeezed focal spot (FWHM = 303 nm) is produced (Fig. 2E, right panel). After passing the focal point, the wavefront begins to spread slightly, but now with a hyperbolic wavefront. For a given set of polariton IFCs, the focusing effect can be modulated by moving the launching source, which produces a phase shift of the entire propagation wave (fig. S8).

The focusing concentrates the energy carried by polaritons to enhance the field intensity. Indeed, the square of the ratio of the electrical field at the focal spot to that without focusing yields an intensity increase by a factor of 10 (Fig. 2E and fig. S9). We note that losses related to refraction at the interface—which involve modal-profile mismatch between PhPs in $\alpha$-MoO$_3$ and hybrid polaritons in graphene/$\alpha$-MoO$_3$, as well as additional losses at the graphene edge—are relatively low (see details in figs. S10 and S11). Our experimental measurements agree well with simulated near-field distributions of Re($E_z$) (Fig. 2, A and D) and the extracted simulation near-field profile also quantitatively matches the experimental data (fig. S9).

The reported in-plane negative refraction takes place over a wide range of incidence angles (Fig. 2F) as well as a wide spectral range, where the opening angle $\beta$ of PhPs in $\alpha$-MoO$_3$ increases with the illumination frequency, and the focal length varies in opposite ways with frequency for the two reversed refraction scenarios (figs. S12 and S13). For incidence or refraction in bare $\alpha$-MoO$_3$, the incidence and refraction angles are both limited by the opening angle $\beta$ as a result of PhPs propagation being prohibited beyond the IFC hyperbolic region, whereas negative refraction can be generated for a wide-angle range. Notably, in the Reststrahlen band III (higher light frequency from 958 to 1010 cm$^{-1}$), a lateral heterostructure can also achieve nanoscale negative refraction arising from the negative group velocity in the reversed dispersion of PhPs in $\alpha$-MoO$_3$, whereas the actual experiment must take the impact of interface losses into account (24).

Active control and dynamic switching of negative refraction can be gained through electrostatic gating by varying the graphene chemical potential. We have demonstrated this possibility by preparing samples with a SiO$_2$/doped-Si substrate instead of Au, such that
we can apply a perpendicular electric field to graphene through a SiO$_2$ dielectric layer coating a Si backgate (Fig. 3A). To obtain a clean interface, we have directly transferred an α-MoO$_3$ film with through holes on the graphene with prefabricated electrodes (Fig. 3B), where polaritons are excited by the tip and subsequently reflected by the hole edge.

The effect of changing gating voltage $V_g$ on the polaritons is shown in Fig. 3C and fig. S15, where the Fermi energy is tuned over a wide range from $E_F = 0$ to −0.66 eV, corresponding to the applied gate voltages (Fig. 3B). As the gate voltage changes from +150 to −150 V, the FWHM transverse size of the focal spot decreases and the focal field intensity increases by more than one order of magnitude (Fig. 3E and fig. S17). Figure S18 shows our gate-tunable negative refraction of another sample with monolayer graphene and thinner α-MoO$_3$, where the FWHM of the focal point reaches sizes as small as 185 nm (i.e., ~1/60 or 1.6% of the free-space light wavelength).

Negative refraction achieved by engaging topological polaritons with different ICP shapes is distinct from that attained by using bulk materials with a negative index of refraction (8). We are essentially relying on a homogeneous film (α-MoO$_3$) in which the addition of an atomically thin layer (graphene) radically changes the polaritonic mode characteristics to enable negative refraction. By changing the Fermi energy of graphene (and correspondingly, the composition of the topological hybrid polaritons), we can actively and continuously transition from normal to negative refraction (figs. S19 and S20 show how gate tuning of graphene affects negative refraction), whereas control of bulk materials remains a challenge. Note that, to achieve a high degree of negative refraction, the required doping level is relatively high. Therefore, we use double-layer graphene and adopt thinner α-MoO$_3$ films in Fig. 3 to decrease the demand for gate voltages, although this results in a shorter propagation distance than in the thicker sample in Fig. 2. To balance propagation distance and tunability range, more efficient double (top-and-back) gates (38) are promising for future investigations, possibly in combination with glass or ion gel spacers.

**Conclusion**

We have experimentally demonstrated a transition from normal to negative refraction in the mid-infrared spectral region by designing a vdW heterostructure consisting of an extended α-MoO$_3$ film that is half covered by monolayer graphene. The observed negative refraction over a wide range of incidence angles, which relies on topological polaritons with tunable dispersion curves, is revealed through real-space nanoimaging based on infrared nanoscopy. We leverage reversible negative refraction to demonstrate nanoscale focusing with either concave or convex wavefronts, which—because of the high spatial confinement of polaritons and the atomic thickness of the employed vdW structures—results in deep subwavelength focal spots with highly squeezed sizes of less than 60 times that of the corresponding illumination wavelength, more than tenfold intensity enhancement, and ~90% transmission of negatively refracted energy. Notably, we show that the transition from normal to negative refraction can be actively tuned by an electrostatic gate, resulting in the ability to control the wavefront of polaritons in situ and change focal spots and their nanoscale optical fields.

Considering the vast range of freshly available two-dimensional polaritonic materials, we anticipate negative refraction of polaritons in other vdW heterostructures involving, for example, α-V$_2$O$_5$, black phosphorus, and nanostructured metasurfaces (e.g., based on isotopically pure h-BN). The broad suite of existing materials could lead to polaritonic negative refraction covering the entire mid-infrared and terahertz region. The combined advantage of strong polariton-field confinement, flexible control over anisotropic polariton propagation and focusing, and tunability by material stacking as well as electric gating opens exciting avenues for negative refraction in optical and thermal applications.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

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