High-contrast modulation of light with light by control of surface plasmon polariton wave coupling

A. V. Kravavin, K. F. MacDonald, and N. I. Zheludev
School of Physics and Astronomy, University of Southampton, SO17 1BJ, United Kingdom

A. V. Zayats
School of Mathematics and Physics, Queen's University of Belfast, BT7 1NN, United Kingdom

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We have demonstrated a new mechanism for modulating light with light by controlling the efficiency with which light is coupled into a plasmon on a polariton wave. An optical intensity of 15 mJ/cm² in the control channel is sufficient to achieve nearly a 10-fold intensity modulation of the signal beam reflected from a glass/MgF₂/Ga structure. The mechanism depends on a nanoscale light-induced structural transformation in the gallium layer and has transient switching times of the order of a few tens of nanoseconds. It offers high modulation contrast for signals in the visible and near infrared spectral ranges.

Surface plasmon polariton (SPP) waves, i.e., surface electron magnetic excitations coupled with electrons at a metal-dielectric interface [1], are attracting increasing attention as a potential new type of information carrier for future highly integrated photonic devices. A range of very promising nanostructures that direct and guide SPP waves and allow for sub-wavelength structural elements on plasmonic "chips" are now being investigated [2,3]. However, it will not be possible to speak about "plasmonics" until techniques for active manipulation of SPP signals are developed. Recent theoretical analysis shows that active switching of plasmonic signals should be possible through a stimulation-induced nanoscale structural transformation in the waveguide material [4]. Here, in a further exploration of this idea, we report for the first time that a light-induced nanoscale structural transformation can be used to control the efficiency with which electron magnetic radiation is coupled into SPP waves, and thus modulate the intensity of optical signals.

SPP waves propagate along the interface between a metal and a dielectric. As the dispersion relation for SPP's is different from that for light, it is possible to couple light into an SPP wave on a smooth surface by using a matching device such as a grating or a prism placed at the interface [1]. Effective coupling is possible only in an optimized regime, i.e., for a particular grating period or for a particular angle of incidence through the prism. The coupling efficiency also depends on the dielectric characteristics of the materials in a very thin region around the interface. That part of the light wave which is not coupled into the SPP wave is reflected from the interface. Our modulation concept is based on the idea that by changing the dielectric characteristics of the metal at the interface through a light-induced structural transformation, one can drive the system away from the resonant coupling conditions and thus exercise control over the intensity of the wave reflected from the interface.

Gallium is a uniquely suitable material to realize this concept. It is known for its polymorphism [5] and gallium, the stable "ground-state" phase [6], has a very low melting point, 29.8 °C, and is partially covalent. The optical properties of Ga and those of the molybdenum 
metallic phases, which are m etastable under normal conditions, are very different. The properties of the metastable phases are similar to those of the highly m etallic liquid phase. In terms of the dielectric coefficients at a wavelength of 780 nm, \( \varepsilon_{\text{liquid}} \approx 5 \). A metastable metallic phase (quasimetallic) may be achieved at the interface by simple heating, or by light absorption through a non-therm al "optical heating" mechanism based on the destabilization of the optically excited covalent bonding structure, which only affects a few atomic layers of the material at an interface [7]. Such structural transformations have already been shown to provide photonic functionality, e.g., for example, all optical switching at normal incidence from bulk interfaces [8] and nanowires [9]. Here we demonstrate experimentally that the use of a stimulated structural transformation to control the coupling between light and SPP waves provides active modulation contrast more than one order of magnitude higher than at bulk interfaces (at normal incidence) and about two orders of magnitude higher than for nanowires.

In our experiments we used the attenuated total reflection device in 0 to 30° configuration [11] for coupling light to an SPP wave. Here gallium is interfaced with a BK7 glass prism covered with a MgF₂ film of thickness D = 185 nm (Fig. 1a). A gallium film was prepared on the prism by sputtering a bead of the liquid metal then solidifying it. A light wave undergoing total internal refection on the glass/MgF₂ interface is efficiently coupled to an SPP wave at the MgF₂/Ga interface at a particular (resonant) angle of incidence where the photon wave vector in glass is equal to the SPP wave vector on the MgF₂/Ga interface. A continuous wave diode laser operating at \( \lambda = 780 \) nm was used as a probe source (Fig. 1a).
dependencies of the reflectivity of the Glass/MgF$_2$/Ga structure on incident angle for s and p polarizations are presented in Fig. 2 for two different Ga phases. The reflectivity of the structure has a clear minimum for the p polarization, but not for the s polarization of the incident light. The reflectivity minimum corresponds to the resonant conditions for coupling light into the SPP wave, which can only be achieved for the p polarization $\alpha$.

The resonant SPP coupling is illustrated by numerical modeling of the electromagnetic fields in the interface area, as presented in Fig. 1 (b) and (c). The gray scale in these images represents the amplitude of the magnetic component of the field (darker for higher amplitude). Image (b) shows the case for high coupling efficiency and low re- sistance, under resonant conditions of SPP excitation ($\alpha = 66^\circ$), when the energy of the incoming wave is converted into the SPP wave and rapidly damped because of high SPP wave losses (Ga phase at the interface). Image (c) shows the case for low coupling efficiency and high resistance (gallium is in the metallic phase at the interface).

The inset in Fig. 2 shows the image reflectivity at $\alpha = 60^\circ$, the resonant angle for excitation of the SPP wave on the MgF$_2$/Ga interface, as a function of increasing thickness $d$ of the metal layer, calculated using data on dielectric coefficients from [10] and [11]. From here one can see that by changing Ga from the $\alpha$-phase to the $\alpha$-phase in a layer only a few nanometers thick, the coupling efficiency, and thus the reflected beam intensity at the resonant incident angle, can be changed dramatically.

To demonstrate light-by-light modulation of the reflected probe beam via a structural transformation from the $\alpha$-phase to the metallic phase in the gallium film, we introduced a channel for optical excitation of the interface with a Nd:YAG laser, generating 6 ns pulses at $\lambda = 1064$ nm with the repetition rate of 20 Hz (Fig. 1a). The control and probe laser spots were overlapped on the interface. Stimulation with the control laser leads to an immediate increase in the reflected probe intensity $R$. At an excitation energy of $Q = 15$ mJ/cm$^2$ the observed reflectivity increase $R = R_{off}$ reaches 9 A, where the $R_{off}$ is the reflectivity of the $\alpha$ phase when the pump laser is off. This significant change in the intensity of the reflected wave corresponds only to about a 20% decrease in the efficiency of coupling into the SPP wave. The magnitude of the effect increases with the energy up to about
The angle of incidence is 60°. The inset shows the dependence of the maximum reflectivity increase on control wave length at 28°C.

FIG. 3: Transient reflectivity of the Glass/MgF$_2$/Ga structure following 6ns pulse excitation at a wavelength of 1.06 μm (Q = 15 mW/cm$^2$) for various structure temperatures. The inset shows the dependence of the maximum reflectivity increase on control wave length at 28°C.

FIG. 4: Temperature dependence of the maximum reflectivity increase (1) and corresponding relaxation time (4) at Q = 15 mJ/cm$^2$.

15 mJ/cm$^2$ and then saturates (insert in Fig 3). This behavior may be explained as follows: higher fluences of optical excitation create a thicker layer of the metalized phase. The maximum reflectivity increase diminishes with temperature. We studied the transient characteristics of the effect by monitoring the reflected signal with a photo-detector and a real-time digital scope (see Fig. 3). The overall bandwidth of the registration system was 125 MHz. The transient "switch-on" time has not been resolved in this experiment. It might have been as short as 4 ps, which was the intrinsic transition time for a transformation from the -phase to the metallic phase [12]. For a given excitation level, there is a steep increase in the relaxation time as the temperature of the structure approaches gallium’s melting temperature $T_m = 29.6^\circ$C, while relaxation times as short as 20 ns are observed at temperatures below 14°C (Fig. 3). This can be explained by the fact that the recrystallization velocity $v$ in turn depends on temperature: $v / T_m = 2/3$, so the closer the system is to the melting temperature, the longer the time required for the metastable metalized layer to recrystallize back to the -phase.

In conclusion, our experiments demonstrate that light-induced metalization of Ga under conditions for "resonant" SPP coupling can lead to a very effective modulation of the reflected light intensity. This observation may provide a strong indication that the active plasmonics concept, proposed in ref [5], will indeed provide an efficient technique for all-optical modulation of SPP signals with a bandwidth of tens of MHz. It follows from the previous studies of optically induced metalization of gallium [7] that the modulation mechanism is inherently optically broadband and could provide high modulation contrast for signals in the visible and near-infrared spectral ranges.

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