Towards a voltage tunable two-color quantum-well infrared photodetector

Amlan Majumdar
Department of Electrical Engineering, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544

K. K. Choi
U.S. Army Research Laboratory, Adelphi, Maryland 20783

L. P. Rokhinson and D. C. Tsui
Department of Electrical Engineering, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544

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Two-color quantum-well infrared photodetectors (QWIPs), based on electron transfer between coupled QWs, suffer from the presence of the shorter wavelength peak at all bias voltages $V_b$. We investigate this problem by studying the bias dependence of absorption coefficient $\alpha$ and photoconductive gain $g$ as a function of wavelength at 10 K. We fabricate such a detector with a peak wavelength of 8 $\mu$m for both bias polarities but a voltage tunable cutoff wavelength (9 $\mu$m for $V_b>0$ and 11 $\mu$m for $V_b<0$). We use corrugated QWIPs with different corrugation periods to extract $\alpha$ and $g$ for different values of $V_b$. We find $\alpha\approx 0.1\,\mu\text{m}^{-1}$ in the 6–12 $\mu$m range with small peaks at 8 and 9.8 $\mu$m for $V_b>0$ and 10 $\mu$m for $V_b<0$. $g$ has a pronounced peak at 7.8 $\mu$m for both bias polarities and determines the line shape of the QWIP spectral responsivity. These results are attributed to insufficient electron transfer between the coupled QWs and to low tunneling probability of the longer wavelength photoelectrons. A modified QWIP structure has been proposed for complete switching of spectral responsivity peak when the bias voltage polarity is reversed.


Multicolor infrared detection is an area of active research because it can be used for remote temperature sensing.1,2 Quantum-well infrared photodetectors (QWIPs) are suitable for multicolor detection because their absorption wavelength can be tailored by varying device and material parameters and their intrinsic absorption line shape is narrow. QWIPs with two stacks of QWs, each designed to detect a different wavelength, are the simplest two-color detectors.3 Focal plane arrays using two stacks of QWs have been recently fabricated.4 Two-color QWIPs with one stack of QWs, where detection wavelength can be changed with bias voltage, have certain advantages over two-stack QWIPs such as simpler readout circuits for focal plane arrays.

Voltage tunable two-color detectors have been proposed in the past based on two main physical mechanisms. The first approach is to change the energy level structure and wave functions of excited states under bias by using asymmetric coupled QWs,5 graded barriers,6 or asymmetric step wells.7 The second approach is based on electron transfer between ground states of adjacent QWs under a voltage bias. This process was first observed in multiple QW (MQW) structures that had alternately doped QWs8 and later used to achieve voltage tunable two-color detection.9 In this approach, voltage switching is less effective for longer wavelength detection because of the persistence of the shorter wavelength peak.

In this letter, we investigate the presence of the shorter wavelength peak in these two-color QWIPs for all bias voltages. We fabricate a QWIP with a responsivity peak at 8 $\mu$m for all voltages $V_b$ and a voltage tunable cutoff wavelength (9 $\mu$m for $V_b>0$ and 11 $\mu$m for $V_b<0$). We study the $V_b$ dependence of absorption coefficient $\alpha$ and photoconductive gain $g$ that are extracted using corrugated-QWIPs (C-QWIPs) with different corrugation periods.10–12 We find that $\alpha$ is almost constant in the 6–12 $\mu$m range with small peaks at 8 and 9.8 $\mu$m for $V_b>0$ and at 10 $\mu$m for $V_b<0$, and that $g$ has a pronounced peak at 7.8 $\mu$m for both polarities of $V_b$. Based on these results, we conclude that there is insufficient electron transfer between the coupled QWs and that the tunneling probability of the longer wavelength photoelectrons is low.

The two-color QWIP consists of 36 periods of coupled QWs sandwiched between a 0.5 $\mu$m thick $n^+$-GaAs top contact layer ($1\times 10^{18}$ cm$^{-3}$ Si doping) and a 1.5 $\mu$m thick $n^+$-GaAs bottom contact layer ($5\times 10^{17}$ cm$^{-3}$ Si doping). Each period consists of a 40 $\AA$ GaAs well coupled to a 44 $\AA$ GaAs barrier through a 50 $\AA$ Al$_{0.28}$Ga$_{0.72}$As barrier and separated from the next set of coupled wells by a 300 $\AA$ Al$_{0.28}$Ga$_{0.72}$As barrier. All the QWs are uniformly doped ($5\times 10^{17}$ cm$^{-3}$ Si doping) and the barriers undoped. We calculated the energy levels in the MQW structure using the transfer matrix method.1 At zero bias, the 40 $\AA$ wide left QW has two bound states separated by 116 meV ($\lambda=10.7$ $\mu$m) while the 44 $\AA$ wide right QW has a bound state and an extended state with an energy difference of 151 meV ($\lambda=8.2$ $\mu$m). We apply $V_b$ to the top contact while keeping the bottom one grounded. The conduction band diagram of this photodetector is shown in the inset of Fig. 1. For positive bias, electrons tunnel from the ground state of the left QW to the ground state of the right QW. When infrared radiation is coupled into this detector, electrons are photoexcited from the ground state to the extended state of the right QW. These photoelectrons are swept away by electric field to
form a photocurrent. Thus, we expect to detect 8.2 μm radiation for both positive and negative \( V_b > 0 \). For negative bias, electron transfer from the right QW to the left QW should lead to the detection of 10.7 μm radiation. It is important to note that for \( V_b < 0 \), these long wavelength photoelectrons have to tunnel through a barrier before contributing to photocurrent.

We processed 45°-edge coupling QWIPs using photolithography and wet etching. These devices have an area of 200×200 μm². Au/Ge/Au contacts were evaporated and alloyed in a rapid thermal annealer to form ohmic contacts to the top and bottom \( n^+\)-GaAs layers. Ac photoresponse measurements were performed at 10 K in the wavelength range from 6 to 12 μm. We show the responsivity \( R \) spectra in Fig. 1. The QWIP detects 8 μm radiation for both positive and negative \( V_b \). Although there is no peak in responsivity around 10.7 μm for \( V_b < 0 \), there is significant photoresponse between 10 and 12 μm. Thus, this detector has a voltage tunable cutoff wavelength while the peak detection wavelength is fixed at 8 μm. We define cutoff wavelength as \( \lambda_c = \lambda_p \) where \( R \) drops to 20% of its peak value \[ R(\lambda_c) = 0.2 \times R(\lambda_p) \], where \( \lambda_p \) is the peak wavelength. \( \lambda_c \), plotted in Fig. 2(a), is 9 μm for \( V_b > 0 \) and 11 μm for \( V_b < 0 \). This figure demonstrates the voltage tunability of \( \lambda_c \) of the QWIP. Figure 2(b) shows the bias dependence of electron activation energy \( E_a \), which is obtained from the temperature dependence of QWIP dark current. \( E_a \) is larger for positive \( V_b \) than for negative \( V_b \). This is consistent with the fact that the detector has lower \( \lambda_c \) for positive bias than for negative bias. However, \( E_a \) extrapolated to zero bias is 163 meV while that given by the cutoff wavelength is 148 meV. This discrepancy may indicate the presence of thermally activated current from the deep donors.

The absence of a peak in responsivity at 10.7 μm for negative \( V_b \) could be due to negligible absorption or low gain. In order to improve the detector structure, we need to determine absorption coefficient \( \alpha \) and photoconductive gain \( g \) as a function of \( \lambda \) for different bias voltages. We use C-QWIPs with different corrugation periods to extract \( \alpha \) and \( g \). The details of this characterization technique can be found in Refs. 11 and 12. The side view of a C-QWIP with three periods is shown in the inset of Fig. 3. \( P \) is the period of the C-QWIP corrugations; \( t \) is the thickness of the top contact layer and active MQW layers that are etched away during processing. We fabricated C-QWIPs with \( P = 10, 15, 20, 30, 40, 60, 300, \) and 1200 μm. Ac spectral responsivity was measured at 10 K in the wavelength range 6–12 μm for \( -6 \) V ≤ \( V_b \) ≤ 6 V. We plot normalized responsivity (NR) as a function of \( P \) in Fig. 3 for 6.5 μm ≤ \( \lambda \) ≤ 7.75 μm and \( V_b = 6 \) V. \( NR = R/t_r \), where \( t_r \) is the ratio of the 77 K dark currents of a C-QWIP with period \( P \) and a C-QWIP with no corrugations \( (P = 1200 \) μm in our case). Using NR instead of \( R \) for data fitting eliminates material variations arising from processing nonuniformities. NR decreases with \( P \) as expected because the average optical intensity in a corrugation decreases with \( P \). We fit the following expression to our data: 12

\[
NR(P) = \frac{R(P)}{t_r} = \frac{e^{e^\frac{1}{\hbar \nu} - e^{-\frac{P}{2\alpha}}} \left( t + e^{\frac{1}{2\alpha}} (1 - e^{2\alpha t}) \right) + R_0 \frac{P}{P - t}}{P - t}
\]

where \( \hbar \nu \) is the energy of infrared radiation and \( R_0 \) is C-QWIP responsivity when \( P \) is very large. \( \alpha \), \( g \), and \( R_0 \) are fitting parameters, and \( t = 2.8 \) μm is the etch depth for our C-QWIPs. The least-squares fit of Eq. (1) to the data for positive \( V_b \) is shown in the inset of Fig. 3. The absence of a peak in responsivity at 10.7 μm for negative \( V_b \) could be due to negligible absorption or low gain.
different wavelengths is shown in Fig. 3, and we see that Eq. (1) fits the data well. We performed this fitting process for the wavelength range 6–12 μm and bias voltage range of −6 to 6 V and found that the fitting is good.

The detector parameters α, g, and Rg extracted from the fitting procedure are shown in Figs. 4(a)–4(c) for Vb = 6 V and Figs. 4(d)–4(f) for Vb = −6 V. We find that α is almost constant, ≈0.1 μm⁻¹, in the entire wavelength range for both bias voltages. However, there are two small peaks in α around 8 and 9.8 μm for Vb = 6 V. For Vb = −6 V, α peaks around 10 μm and has a large long-wavelength tail. The detector gain g, on the other hand, has a very pronounced peak at 7.8 μm for both polarities. At Vb = 6 V, g decreases sharply for λ > 7.8 μm and is zero for λ > 10 μm. However, for Vb = −6 V, g decreases slowly beyond 7.8 μm and does not go to zero for long wavelengths. The pronounced peak in g at 7.8 μm and the relatively wavelength insensitive α lead to the bias independent 8 μm peak in R. The line shape of R is determined by the line shape of g. The maximum value of g (≈0.03), implies that photoelectrons from one QW, on the average, travel just one period in the MQW structure before being captured by another QW. Rg and R have the same peak position and similar linewidth for Vb = ±6 V [see Figs. 1, 4(c), and 4(f)].

The approximately constant value of α as a function of λ indicates inefficient transfer of electrons between the coupled QWs under an applied bias. This is probably due to insufficient voltage drop between the QW pair. The coupled wells have a 50 Å undoped AlGaAs barrier between them and are separated from the next set of coupled wells by a 500 Å undoped AlGaAs barrier. Voltage division between these two barriers leads to less than 10% of the voltage drop across each period of the MQW to drop between the coupled QWs. For example, at Vb = 6 V, only 15 mV drops between the coupled wells out of the 160 mV that drops across each period of the MQW. To enhance electron transfer, a larger potential difference is needed between the coupled wells. This can be achieved by growing a thicker AlGaAs barrier between the QW pair.

The presence of the 7.8 μm peak in g for all biases and the lack of any peak in g around 10.7 μm for Vb<0 can be attributed to bound-to-extended state transition in the 8 μm well and bound-to-bound state transition in the 10.7 μm well. The tunneling probability and, hence, photoconductive gain, of the 10.7 μm photoelectrons can be increased by using a thinner layer of Al0.2Ga0.72As in the step barrier between the adjacent periods of the MQW.

In conclusion, we have investigated the presence of the shorter wavelength peak for both bias polarities in two-color QWIPs based on transfer of electrons between coupled QWs under a bias. The detector we fabricated has a peak wavelength of 8 μm for both polarities of Vb but a voltage tunable cutoff wavelength λc. λc is 9 μm for Vb>0 and 11 μm for Vb<0. We have used C-QWIPs with different corrugation periods to extract absorption coefficient α and photoconductive gain g as a function of wavelength under different operating conditions. We found α≈0.1 μm⁻¹ with small peaks at 8 and 9.8 μm for positive Vb and at 10 μm for negative Vb. We also found a peak in g at 7.8 μm for both bias polarities. The QWIP responsivity line shape is determined by the line shape of g. We attribute these observations to insufficient electron transfer between the coupled QWs and to low tunneling probability of the longer wavelength photoelectrons. Based on our understanding of detector parameters α and g, we proposed a modified QWIP structure that should lead to complete switching of spectral responsivity peak when the polarity of the bias voltage is reversed.

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