Mode Specific Backscattering in a Quantum Point Contact


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ABSTRACT: We demonstrate a scanning gate grid measurement technique consisting in measuring the conductance of a quantum point contact (QPC) as a function of gate voltage at each tip position. Unlike conventional scanning gate experiments, it allows investigating QPC conductance plateaus affected by the tip at these positions. We compensate the capacitive coupling of the tip to the QPC and discover that interference fringes coexist with distorted QPC plateaus. We spatially resolve the mode structure for each plateau.

KEYWORDS: Scanning gate microscopy, quantum point contact, GaAs, ballistic transport

INTRODUCTION

Scanning gate microscopy (SGM) is used to investigate the conductance of a nanostructure by modifying its electrostatic potential (gating effect) or by locally changing the electron density of a two-dimensional system resulting in backscattering in case of a strong tip potential. Both effects usually coexist (see, e.g., refs 20 and 21 for detailed discussions) and appear due to a Lorentzian potential induced by the electrically biased tip of the scanning force microscope. In top gate defined quantum point contacts (QPCs), such backscattering experiments allow studying quantum effects, e.g., the interference of backscattered electrons, as small variations of the conductance in the form of interference fringes decorating branches. The gating effect (modification of the QPC potential via capacitive coupling of the tip to the QPC) significantly decreases the conductance when scanning the tip close to the QPC. Since gating is the stronger effect, quantum interference effects can be masked by gating. It is therefore important to compensate the gating effect of the QPC to obtain more precise information about the quantum effects.

One way to compensate the gating effect is to scan the surface twice (the two-pass technique used in previous experiments): (i) at a large tip–surface separation, when the tip does not deplete the 2DEG, and (ii) at a small separation when it does. In both cases the capacitive coupling of the tip to the QPC (gating) is approximately the same, but backscattering is present only in pass ii. Therefore, by recording the gate voltage necessary to keep the conductance constant in pass i and using this know-how in pass ii by simultaneously measuring the conductance allows compensating the gating effect. However, this technique may not be reliable, because often gating is slightly different for the two tip–surface separations (the difference becomes larger as the tip moves closer to the QPC), which can lead to undercompensation. It depends on the parameters of the gate voltage feedback that keeps the conductance constant in pass i, which limits the scanning speed especially very close to the QPC where the tip potential is steep at the position of the constriction and therefore the conductance changes rapidly. Scanning the surface twice and measuring only at a single value of the conductance set in pass i significantly increases the time for the detailed investigation of physical phenomena compared to the time needed for single-pass scans.

In this work, we present a scanning gate grid technique and demonstrate its advantages for the example of a scanning gate measurement close to a QPC fabricated in a high-mobility GaAs/AlGaAs heterostructure. The method consists in measuring the conductance of a QPC as a function of top gate voltage at each tip position. This kind of technique is well-known in scanning probe microscopy. For example, in scanning tunnelling microscopy it is well-established to measure the differential conductance at each tip position (see, e.g., refs 32 and 33). In previous SGM experiments, conductance–tip voltage traces were recorded at several tip positions to study the quantized conductance in a quantum wire, defects in carbon nanotubes, the conductance in the quantum Hall regime in a QPC. We exploit the grid technique using a large density of points in a three-dimensional parameter space.

Scanning gate grid measurements allow fully compensating the gating effect at any tip–QPC distances. The only limitation to scan close to the QPC is the size of the tip-depleted region. A single grid measurement contains scanning gate data for many QPC transmissions. The manipulation of data, e.g., subtracting the conductance at different gate voltages, is more reliable compared to that in standard SGM measurements. It is carried out at each tip position. Since it takes much less time to record values of the conductance at different gate voltages at a specific tip position using the grid than the standard technique, sample drifts will affect the results much less. In addition, measuring the gate voltage dependent conductance at each tip position gives information about the effect of the tip on these

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traces, which is inaccessible in the standard measurements. Scanning as close to the QPC as possible we resolve its mode structure seen as a widening lobe pattern with the number of lobes equal to the number of QPC modes and maxima of $|Ψ|^2$ inside the point contact up to five modes. We observe distorted conductance plateaus caused by the tip and discuss their origin. We study the fringe spacing for the QPC modes and distorted plateaus. Results of the SGM grid measurements are compared to previous scanning gate experiments. Grid measurements are thus a powerful tool which can give more information about the studied system compared to that in standard scanning gate experiments.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

A two-dimensional electron gas 120 nm deep below the surface is defined in a high-quality GaAs/AlGaAs heterostructure. At a density of $n = 1.4 \times 10^{11}$ cm$^{-2}$ electrons have a mobility of $9.6 \times 10^6$ cm$^2/(V\text{s})$ measured at 300 mK. Their elastic mean free path and the Fermi wavelength are $l_p = 60 \mu$m and $\lambda_F = 66$ nm, respectively.

The sample consists of a QPC with a lithographic width of 300 nm and a pair of parallel “channel” top gates separated by 100 nm from the QPC gates, that are 15 $\mu$m long, 150 nm wide and separated by 1 $\mu$m (Figure 1a). These “channel” top gates are not used in this work, but to compensate strain-related electric fields present below them at zero voltage, we apply a voltage of +200 mV to them. The top gates are Ti/Au electrodes, which are 30 nm high.

Scanning gate measurements are carried out in a He-3 system using a home-built scanning force microscope at 300 mK by applying an ac source-drain voltage of $V_{sd} = 100 \mu$V at a frequency of 977 Hz. A metallic tip biased at $V_{tip} = -6$ V scans at a constant height of 60 nm above the surface inducing a tip-depleted region about 1 $\mu$m in diameter. The two-terminal current flowing through the sample is converted into voltage using a current–voltage converter with a feedback resistor of 1 M$\Omega$ and a bandwidth of 30 kHz. The conductance $G$ is
Figure 3. (a) Conventional technique: $G(x, y)$ as a function of tip position (raw data) close to the QPC when the constriction is biased on each of the five $G$ plateaus (labeled). (b) Scanning gate grid measurements: $\Delta G(x, y)$ plotted using the technique described in the main text resolving the structure of the first five QPC modes (labeled). Blue arrows mark some of the regions where distorted QPC conductance plateaus manifest themselves in scanning gate maps.

The QPC is tuned to the second plateau in the absence of the background conductance from 2 to about 1.95 $\mu$m. This gives the conductance $G_i(x, y)$ as a function of tip position (raw data) close to the QPC when the constriction is biased on each of the first five QPC modes (labeled). The pixel separation is 20 nm in Figures 1 and 2, and 8 nm in Figure 3. The lock-in time constant is 3 ms and the filter slope is 12 dB/oct.

Figure 1b compares typical dependences of the conductance through the QPC as a function of top gate voltage with the tip placed about a micron away from the constriction and with the tip withdrawn from the sample surface. Due to electron backscattering off the tip-depleted region the conductance at the plateau is lowered $^{16,21}$ (green curve) below the quantized value (black curve). In 2D conductance maps this deviation from the quantized conductance gives a spatial pattern in which branches and interference fringes can be seen. $^{16,17,21,31}$ In addition, the gating effect caused by the long-range “tails” of the tip-induced potential capacitively coupled to the QPC shifts $G(V_g)$ curves to more positive voltages. $^{21}$ The strength of these two effects varies with tip position.

Figure 1c shows the conductance, a function of tip position using the standard measurement (first type described above). The QPC is tuned to the second plateau in the absence of the tip and the value of the corresponding gate voltage remains the same throughout the entire scan. Both gating and backscattering effects are clearly seen in this 2D conductance map: branches mark regions of strong backscattering and the gating effect is seen from the color code as a slow decrease of the background conductance from 2 to about 1.95 $\times 2e^2/h$ as the tip moves closer to the QPC. The constriction is about 1 $\mu$m away from the lower border of the scan frame, i.e., from $y = 0 \mu$m. These observations are in agreement with those of others $^{17,30}$ and with our previous measurements. $^{21}$ The gating effect makes it difficult to resolve small variations of the conductance at $0 < y < 1 \mu$m.

To compensate it with the help of the results of the grid measurement technique, we use $G(x, y, V_g)$ curves (Figure 1b) to determine the values of $V_g$ plotted in Figure 1d corresponding to the middle of the second plateau at each tip position $(x, y)$. The gate voltage $V_{pl}$ at the middle of a plateau corresponds to a zero in the first derivative $dG(V_g)/dV_g$ which we determine numerically from the data. We then determine a value of the conductance $G(V_{pl}(x, y))$ that corresponds to $V_{pl}$. This procedure performed at each tip position results in compensated conductance maps $G(x, y, V_{pl}(x, y))$. The result is given in Figure 1e, where the value $2e^2/h$ was subtracted. As seen from the uniform background color, the gating effect is compensated and only the backscattering effect (branches) of the tip is present. The shape of the branches at $0 < y < 1 \mu$m is also uncovered. Subtracting $\Delta G$ in (e) from $G$ in part c we obtain a smooth background with a local roughness $\Delta G/G$ of less than 0.5%. In addition, no branches are seen in the $V_{pl}(x, y)$ map in Figure 1d. Fringes originating from interference of backscattered electron waves $^{16,17,21,31}$ are not visible in the images in Figure 1, parts c and e, due to insufficient spatial resolution intentionally chosen to decrease the measurement time.

The $G(x, y, V_{pl}(x, y))$ map in Figure 1e has two contributions: a decrease of $G$ for electrons transmitted through the lowest QPC mode, and a decrease of $G$ for electrons transmitted through the second QPC mode. We plot the effect of the tip on a specific plateau in the following way. We determine the center of plateau $i$ for each point $(x,y)$ using the corresponding minimum at $V_{pl}(x,y)$ of $dG(x,y,V_g)/dV_g$. This gives the conductance $G_i(x, y, V_{pl}(x, y))$. By subtracting the quantized value $G_{qi} = i \times 2e^2/h$, we obtain $\delta G_i(x, y, V_{pl}(x, y)) = G_i(x, y, V_{pl}(x, y)) - G_{qi} \leq 0$. In addition, by subtracting
The result of this analysis is shown in Figure 2, parts a and b. Both plots use the same color scale and the same range on the color axis without any offset. Differences in the intensity and position of branches are clearly seen. For comparison we show \( \delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} \) of the previous plateau, we obtain the effect of the tip only on a particular plateau \( i \) (we assume that the contribution of plateau \( i-1 \) to the conductance at the gate voltage of plateau \( i \) is the same as at the gate voltage of plateau \( i-1 \)):

\[
\delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} = G_{\text{G}(x,y)} - G_{\text{G}(x,y)} = -2e^2/h
\]  

The result of this analysis is shown in Figure 2, parts a and b. Both plots use the same color scale and the same range on the color axis without any offset. Differences in the intensity and position of branches are clearly seen. For comparison we show \( \delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} \) in Figure 2c (same as in Figure 1e).

Using parts a and b, one can plot a map of tip positions at which the effect of the tip on a certain plateau exceeds a given threshold value. To do this, we introduce a parameter \( \beta \) that can take integer values 0 (no branches) and \( \beta > 0 \) (there is a branch in \( \Delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} \), and choose threshold values \( \Delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} = -0.007 \times 2e^2/h \) and \( \Delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} = -0.011 \times 2e^2/h \) in Figure 2, parts a and b, respectively. The threshold values are chosen by eye to select most of the branches. Then for all values below the threshold of \( \Delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} \) we set \( \beta = 1 \) and for those below that of \( \Delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} \) we set \( \beta = 2 \). Then, if \( \beta = 1, 2, \) and 3, the tip affects only the first plateau, only the second plateau and both plateaus, respectively. The result is shown in Figure 2d. The branches colored in green are regions where the tip affects only the first plateau, in yellow only the second plateau and in brown both plateaus. The blue color corresponds to areas where there is no backscattering by the tip and therefore \( \Delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} = 0 \). This result shows that as the tip moves across a branch, it can affect several QPC plateaus one after another or simultaneously along its way. At the same time the conductance can exhibit a single dip.

Far from the QPC the main advantage of the grid technique is to separate effects of the tip on each conductance plateau. The gating effect is relatively weak there. However, gating becomes significant when scanning closer to the QPC as seen in conventional SGM images at fixed gate voltages in Figure 3a. The border of the scan area at \( y = 0 \mu m \) is about 0.5 \( \mu m \) away from the QPC. As one can see in Figure 3a, the tip can reduce \( G \) by up to \( 2 \times 2e^2/h \) depending on QPC width. As a result, \( G \) variations (branches and fringes) are not discernible in the lower half of the images. Nevertheless, interference fringes can already be seen in some regions. Scanning gate grid measurements allow us to compensate the gating effect (Figure 3b) leaving the size of the tip-depleted region to be the only limiting factor preventing to scan even closer to the QPC. As a result, the QPC mode structure and spreading of the interference pattern can be resolved. The technique depends on the width \( W \) of the tip-induced potential. The range of \( \Delta V_g \) needed to compensate the gating effect is larger for larger \( W \). In our paper the related change in QPC potential is tiny. As the QPC widens, more modes transmit through it leading to an angular lobe pattern. The number of lobes is equal to the number of modes at the Fermi energy, which in turn is equal to

\[ \delta G_{\text{G}(x,y)} = G_{\text{G}(x,y)} - G_{\text{G,(x,y)}} = -2e^2/h \]
the number of maxima of the squared confined wave function $|Ψ|^2$ in the direction normal to the transport axis. For example, for the first QPC mode in Figure 3b, one lobe is observed at $0 < y < 0.15 \mu m$. At $y > 0.15 \mu m$, it branches out. For the second mode there are two lobes of the angular pattern. For higher modes branching slowly takes over not allowing us to observe the lobe pattern clearly.

In comparison with other works to image angular patterns of individual modes, the presented grid technique allows observing interference fringes coexisting with the angular lobes. It helps compensating the gating effect to study more subtle quantum interference phenomena. This is done point by point in space making it possible to scan large areas neglecting time drifts of the sample as it takes much less time to record the conductance at a single point than in the entire area. We learn how the characteristic QPC curves $G(V_g)$ are affected by the tip at each point in space. This information is inaccessible in standard SGM experiments.

Resolving the QPC mode structure allows us to study it in more detail. One can notice fringes between the lobes in Figure 3b seen as alternating dark and bright red stripes (some of them are marked by blue arrows as an example). Fringes of the dark red color correspond to $ΔG > 0$, i.e., $i > 1$. The color scale was limited to $ΔG < 0$ in all figures to simplify descriptions of the observed effects. Limiting $ΔG < 0$ separates different effects of the tip more transparently.}
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