Tunnel spin polarization of Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ probed with a magnetic tunnel transistor

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The tunnel spin polarization of Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ interfaces has been investigated using a magnetic tunnel transistor (MTT). The MTT with a Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ emitter shows a magnetocurrent of 74% at 100 K, corresponding to a tunnel spin polarization of the Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ interface of 27%. This is only slightly lower than the value of 34% for Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/Al$_2$O$_3$ interfaces determined in similar MTT structures. This suggests that SiO$_2$ can be applied in semiconductor spintronic devices, for example in ferromagnet/SiO$_2$/Si tunnel contacts for spin injection.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Spin-polarized tunneling of electrons in ferromagnet (FM)/insulator (I) heterostructures has been extensively studied because it determines the tunnel magnetoresistance of a magnetic tunnel junction. The tunnel spin polarization is not an intrinsic property of the FM layer, but is also dependent on interfacial properties and the choice of a tunnel barrier. The amplitude of the tunnel spin polarization and even its sign can be altered by changing the adjacent oxide barrier. Recently, it has been reported that a tunnel spin polarization of about 80% is achieved for transition metals such as CoFe or Fe when crystalline MgO is introduced as a tunnel barrier. Spin-polarized tunneling from FM/I contacts also draws much attention in the semiconductor spintronics technology as it can be used in a spin injection device of a ferromagnet/insulator/semiconductor structure, where the tunnel barrier is introduced in order to overcome the conductance mismatch between a ferromagnetic metal and a semiconductor.

The standard technique for probing the tunnel spin polarization of a FM/I interface was developed by Meservey and Tedrow.1 This technique is constrained to low temperatures (less than 1 K) because a superconductor is used as an electrode into which electrons tunnel. In this work, we have used an alternative method to probe the tunnel spin polarization of a FM/I interface using a magnetic tunnel transistor (MTT). The MTT is a three-terminal hybrid device consisting of a tunnel emitter, a FM base, and a semiconductor collector. In a MTT with a FM emitter and a base with a single FM layer, spin-polarized hot electrons are injected into the base by tunneling. After spin-dependent scattering in the FM base, they are collected in the conduction band of the semiconductor, provided they have the right energy and momentum to overcome the Schottky barrier formed at the base/collector interface. The magnetic response of the MTT, the so-called magnetocurrent (MC), is determined by the spin-polarized tunneling from the emitter and by spin-dependent transmission in the FM base. Since the MC depends on the tunnel spin polarization and the MTT operates with a typical emitter bias of the order of 1 V and at finite temperature, the MTT can be used to study the spin polarization of ferromagnet/insulator interfaces at high bias voltage and finite temperature. In our previous work, the tunnel spin polarization of Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/Al$_2$O$_3$ interfaces at an emitter bias of 1 V was measured in the temperature range from 100 K to room temperature. In this work, we have fabricated a MTT with a composite Al$_2$O$_3$/SiO$_2$ tunnel barrier and investigated the tunnel spin polarization of the Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ interface (see Fig. 1). Since SiO$_2$ is widely used as a gate oxide and the growth of SiO$_2$ on top of Si is well established in semiconductor technology, SiO$_2$ is a potential candidate as a tunnel barrier in Si-based spintronic devices such as FM/SiO$_2$/Si tunnel contacts for spin injection. However, reports on the tunnel spin polarization of FM/SiO$_2$ interfaces are rare, and a tunnel magnetoresistance (TMR) of only 4% was reported in a magnetic tunnel junction (MTJ) with a SiO$_2$ barrier. This is quite a low value as compared to that of MTJs with other tunnel barriers such as Al$_2$O$_3$ or MgO. The low TMR in the MTJ with a SiO$_2$ tunnel barrier is not clearly understood. It could be due to an intrinsic low tunnel spin polarization of the FM/SiO$_2$ interface, or due to a materials issue such as silicide formation during the fabrication process. Here, it is shown that a MTT with a Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ emitter exhibits a magnetocurrent (MC) of 74% at an emitter bias of 1 V.

FIG. 1. Schematic energy diagram of a MTT with a composite Al$_2$O$_3$/SiO$_2$ tunnel barrier, in which the tunnel spin polarization of the emitter is determined by the Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ interface.
bias of −1 V and 100 K, which corresponds to a tunnel spin polarization of 27% for the Ni80Fe20/SiO2 interface. This demonstrates that electrons tunneling from the Ni80Fe20/SiO2 interface are intrinsically highly spin polarized.

II. EXPERIMENTS

Samples were deposited by e-beam evaporation in a molecular beam epitaxy system at a base pressure of 10⁻¹⁰ mbar. The structure of the MTT was n-type Si/Au (7 nm)/Co (8 nm)/Al2O3/SiO2/Ni80Fe20 (10 nm)/Au (10 nm). The films were grown on a lithographically defined area of an n-type Si wafer, surrounded by a thick SiO2 to reduce the device size and eliminate edge leakage currents across the collector diode. A high quality Schottky barrier of 0.8 eV was formed at the interface between an n-type Si substrate and an Au layer. The leakage current across the collector diode is less than 0.2 pA at a temperature of 100 K. The composite tunnel barrier of Al2O3/SiO2 was formed by a double step process. Since the MC depends on the tunnel spin polarization of the emitter interface, we introduced a SiO2 barrier at the emitter interface only and kept the base interface of Al2O3/FM to avoid any possibility of silicide formation. First, an Al2O3 barrier was formed by plasma oxidation of an Al layer of thickness between 0.3 and 2.4 nm. Then, a thin Si layer of 0.2 to 0.6 nm was deposited and then plasma oxidized to form a composite Al2O3/SiO2 tunnel barrier. The oxidation conditions for each tunnel barrier are summarized in Table I. The barrier thicknesses as well as deposition layer thicknesses, prior to oxidation. After oxidation, the SiO2 would be about two times thicker than the as-deposited Si layer while the thickness of Al2O3 increases by about 25%. MT devices were fabricated using standard photolithography, ion beam etching, and lift-off techniques. The diameter of the junction area varied from 10 to 100 μm and that of the base-collector diode from 20 to 130 μm. Transport measurements were conducted using a four-point geometry for the emitter to base tunnel junction and a separate ohmic contact to the back of the Si collector at a temperature of 100 K.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The collector current (\(I_C\)) as a function of emitter bias voltage for a MTT with an Al2O3 (0.8 nm)/SiO2 (0.6 nm) tunnel barrier is shown in the top panel of Fig. 2. The curve labeled P state (AP state) is obtained in a magnetic field of −100 Oe (+17 Oe), corresponding to a parallel (antiparallel) alignment of the Co and Ni80Fe20 magnetizations. The \(I_C\) abruptly increases with emitter bias voltage at an onset voltage of 0.8 V that corresponds to the barrier height of the Au/n-Si collector Schottky diode. \(I_C\) for the parallel alignment is larger than that for an antiparallel alignment. To clearly see the magnetic field dependence, the \(I_C\) was measured at a bias voltage of −1 V while sweeping the magnetic field (middle panel of Fig. 2). There are two current levels depending on the external magnetic field. At large magnetic fields, the two magnetic layers have their magnetization directions aligned parallel. This gives the largest \(I_C\) of 78.5 pA. When the magnetic field is reversed and reaches a field region where the magnetizations of two FM layers are antiparallel, the \(I_C\) reduces to 45.0 pA. This results in a MC of 74%. Here, MC is defined as \((I_C^- - I_C^+) / I_C^P\), where P and AP refer to the parallel and antiparallel alignment of two magnetic layers, respectively. The MC of a MTT with a composite Al2O3/SiO2 barrier is lower than the MC of 95% of a MTT with 2.4 nm thick Al2O3, which is shown in the bottom panel of Fig. 2. The switching field of the Co layer in the MTT with the Al2O3/SiO2 barrier is larger than that with the Al2O3 barrier. This could be due to the Co oxide formation at the interface with the tunnel barrier because of over-oxidation.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Al thickness (nm)</th>
<th>(t_{ox}) (min)</th>
<th>Si thickness (nm)</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0.2,0.4,0.6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE I. Summary of thickness and oxidation time \((t_{ox})\) for each composite tunnel barrier.
The tunnel spin polarization can be extracted from the MC value. The MC of a MTT with a ferromagnetic emitter is determined by spin-dependent tunneling from the emitter and spin-dependent transport of hot electrons in the base. The MC can be expressed as follows:

\[ MC = \frac{2P_{t,E}T_B}{1 - P_{t,E}T_B}, \]  

where \( P_{t,E} \) is the tunnel spin polarization from the emitter and \( T_B \) is the spin asymmetry in the base transmission, defined as follows:

\[ T_B = \frac{\delta^M \exp(-t/\lambda^M) - \delta^m \exp(-t/\lambda^m)}{\delta^M \exp(-t/\lambda^M) + \delta^m \exp(-t/\lambda^m)}. \]

Here, \( \delta^M \) and \( \delta^m \) are the number of majority and minority tunnel electrons associated with the emitter/base interface, \( t \) is the FM base layer thickness, and \( \lambda^M \) and \( \lambda^m \) are the hot-electron attenuation lengths for the majority and minority spins in the FM base.

Since the attenuation length of the majority spin hot electrons is considerably larger than that of minority spins, at large base thickness only majority spins can be transmitted \((T_B \sim 1)\), and the MC is saturated at a value of \( 2P_{t,E} / (1 - P_{t,E}) \) and is dependent only on the tunnel spin polarization. This allows the MTT to be used to probe the tunnel spin polarization of FM/Interface.

Figure 3 shows the MC and corresponding tunnel spin polarization of the emitter interface at 100 K as a function of Si thickness for a MTT with composite \( \text{Al}_2\text{O}_3/\text{SiO}_2 \) oxide. In the graph, symbols represent the four different Al layers with thicknesses from 0.3 to 2.4 nm, with oxidation time and spin-dependent transport of hot electrons in the base. The MC value only depends on the tunnel spin polarization of the emitter interface. The tunnel spin polarization extracted from the MC values decreases from 34 to 27% with increasing \( \text{SiO}_2 \) thickness. This shows that electrons tunneling from the \( \text{Ni}_{80}\text{Fe}_{20}/\text{SiO}_2 \) interface are highly spin polarized even though the spin polarization is slightly lower than the value of 34% for a \( \text{Ni}_{80}\text{Fe}_{20}/\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3 \) interface.

The MTs can also be used to obtain the tunnel magnetoresistance (TMR) of the emitter/insulator/base tunnel junction. The TMR measurements were done at a bias voltage of 20 mV and 100 K. The results are shown in the top panel of Fig. 4. The TMR decreases from 27 to 17% as the Si thickness is increased from zero to 0.6 nm. Whereas the reduction of the MC is due to the decrease of the tunnel spin polarization of the emitter interface, the TMR ratio is determined by the product of the tunnel spin polarization of bottom and top FM interfaces. Using the Juliere model, the TMR can be expressed as 

\[ \text{TMR} = 2P_{t,E}P_{t,B}/(1 - P_{t,E}P_{t,B}), \]

where \( P_{t,E} \) and \( P_{t,B} \) are the tunnel spin polarization of the emitter (top) and base (bottom) FM interfaces, respectively. The latter can be obtained from the MC. Even though the MC was measured at the bias voltage of \(-1 \) V, the extracted \( P_{t,E} \) represents the tunnel spin polarization of the states near the Fermi level because most of the tunnel electrons contributing to the MC come from those states. The tunnel electrons from the states away from the Fermi level are filtered out at the Schottky barrier of the collector. Therefore, the \( P_{t,E} \) values...
shown in Fig. 3 are applicable to calculate the $P_{t,b}$ with the TMR measured at a low bias voltage. The results are shown in the bottom panel of Fig. 4. The figure shows that the tunnel spin polarization of the bottom Co interface is independent of the SiO$_2$ thickness. This is expected because the bottom interfaces are the same Co/Al$_2$O$_3$ contact regardless of the SiO$_2$ thickness. This indicates that there is no significant intermixing or structural relocation of the oxide layers during the oxidation process. The tunnel spin polarization of the bottom interface is 37% for junctions with 2.4 and 1.2 nm Al layers. However, it reduces to 30% for junctions with 0.8 and 0.3 nm Al layers. If the Al layer is thin, the Co base layer underneath can be partially oxidized during the plasma oxidation. This overoxidation causes the lower tunnel spin polarization of the bottom interfaces for junctions with a thin Al layer. This may also be responsible for the increase of the switching field of the Co layer as shown in Fig. 2.

The large tunnel spin polarization values obtained here may appear at odds with the absence of large TMR in MTJs with SiO$_2$ barriers. To gain more insight, we have also fabricated MTTs with a pure SiO$_2$ barrier. Si layers of 1.5 ~2.5 nm were deposited on top of the Co base and subsequently oxidized in the oxygen plasma. Such MTTs showed a similar tunnel junction resistance and collector current to that of MTTs with the Al$_2$O$_3$/SiO$_2$ composite barrier. However, there was no magnetic field dependence of the junction resistance or the collector current. This can be explained by Co-silicide formation during the deposition or the oxidation process. The Co-silicide induces paramagnetic defects in the tunnel barrier or at the interfaces with the FM layers. Such defects act as scattering centers for spins, resulting in no magnetic response. We therefore believe that silicide formation is responsible for the low TMR in the MTJ with the SiO$_2$ barrier, instead of an intrinsically low tunnel spin polarization.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

We have investigated the tunnel spin polarization of a Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ interface using a magnetic tunnel transistor. The tunnel spin polarization of the Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ interface is 27% at 100 K, which is only slightly lower than that of the Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/Al$_2$O$_3$ interface. This demonstrates that the low TMR in a MTJ with a SiO$_2$ barrier is not due to an intrinsic low tunnel spin polarization of the Ni$_{80}$Fe$_{20}$/SiO$_2$ interface, but due to a materials issue such as silicide formation. Therefore, SiO$_2$ can be applied in semiconductor spintronic devices, for example in devices that use FM/SiO$_2$/Si tunnel contacts for spin injection.

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