Specular Scattering Probability of Acoustic Phonons in Atomically Flat Interfaces

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We report a direct determination of the specular scattering probability of acoustic phonons at a crystal boundary by observing the escape of incident coherent phonons from the coherent state during reflection. In the sub-THz frequency range where the phonon wavelength is much longer than the lattice constant, the acoustic phonon-interface interaction is found to agree well with the macroscopic theory on wave scattering from rough surfaces. This examination thus quantitatively verifies the dominant role of atomic-scale corrugations in the Kapitza anomaly observed at 1–10 K and further opens a new path to nondestructively estimate subnanoscale roughness of buried interfaces.

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Phonon scattering at a crystal boundary generally causes a reduction in the efficiency of heat transport. At a temperature <1 K, this phenomenon was satisfactorily explained by the acoustic mismatch model, while it deviated from the expectation at higher temperatures (so-called Kapitza anomaly) [1–5]. A number of reports suggested that diffuse scattering of high-frequency phonons (>100 GHz) by interface inhomogeneity or irregularity could be a channel resulting in anomalous transmission [3]. Even with these studies, no generally accepted theory has emerged due to limited experiments performed with well-characterized interfaces. Consequently, the dominant mechanism inducing the diffuse scattering of high-frequency phonons is still unknown. The corresponding quantitative description of specular (diffuse) scattering probability, the fraction of phonons scattered specularly (diffusively), is thus absent so far. Exploration of these issues is essential not only for explaining present-day observations in cryogenics, but also for heat management in nanoscale devices due to their prominent surface effect.

Transition from normal-to-anomalous Kapitza resistance typically occurs near 1 K up to 10 K, where the dominant acoustic phonons for heat transport have frequencies in the sub-THz range [1–3]. Studies on the corresponding sub-THz acoustic phonon-interface interactions can thus provide critical clues to the cause of Kapitza anomaly. Phonon imaging and phonon-pulse techniques can acquire the information of interface phonon scatterings by examining whether phonon reflection/ refraction violates the momentum conservation [2–4], while they cannot determine the specular scattering probability (SSP) quantitatively. In addition, it is difficult to investigate the concerned buried interface with required atomic resolutions during these cryogenic experiments.

In this Letter, we report a direct determination of the SSP of the sub-THz acoustic phonons at well-characterized crystal boundaries. Our quantitative studies indicate the dominant role of atomic-scale interface roughness in diffuse phonon scatterings, which therefore clarify the longstanding debates on Kapitza anomaly. This examination further suggests a new possibility to nondestructively probe subnanoscale corrugations on buried interfaces.

Measurement of the SSP can be realized by looking into the destruction of phonon coherence induced by the diffuse scatterings. The analysis relies on a technique sensitive to phonon phase. Femtosecond laser ultrasonics [5–7] and nanoultrasonics [8–10] can serve as feasible solutions, which detect only the coherent part of the acoustic phonons. When photoexcited coherent phonons interact with an interface, the diffuse scatterings cause part of the phonons to be scattered out of the coherent state. Excess reduction in the intensity of scattered coherent phonons compared with the acoustic mismatch model thus reflects the contribution of diffuse scatterings. The SSP is then extracted by monitoring the intensities of the coherent acoustic phonons before and after interface scatterings. Few pieces of related literatures with only qualitative analysis or in a lower frequency regime can be found elsewhere [7,9].

Among all of the proposed scattering mechanisms [1], the concern in this Letter is the roughness effect. To correlate the measured SSP with the roughness, the first step is to investigate coherent phonon reflection at solid-air interfaces. The exposure of the concerned interfaces to atmosphere makes high-resolution surface characterizations possible. Moreover, it was known that at solid-vacuum interfaces, loading of liquid helium on solid surfaces did not induce noticeable change in the specular part of reflected phonons [4]. Invariance of the corresponding
SSP suggested that diffuse scattering is mainly related to the properties of solid surfaces rather than the interfacial structure of liquid. It is thus important to clarify the scattering mechanism at free solid surfaces for the Kapitza problem. With huge impedance mismatch between air and solid, the excited phonon energy was completely confined in solids so that the dissipation of the coherent phonon intensity during reflection was directly attributed to the diffuse scattering.

Laser-ultrasonic and nanoultrasonic experiments were executed at room temperature with optical pump-probe setups [8]. The light source was a frequency-doubled Ti:sapphire laser with \( \lambda/C_2 = 200 \) fs pulse width. The probe wavelength was 365 nm, corresponding to the interband transition of the studied solid medium (GaN), while optical pump pulses with wavelengths of 730 or 365 nm were used for different experiments. Pulse energy and focused spot diameter onto the sample for the blue (infrared) pumps were 0.2 (0.5) nJ and 15 (23) \( \mu m \). An atomic force microscope (AFM) was used to estimate surface roughness.

Figure 1 shows the schematic diagrams of the experiments for frequency- and roughness-dependent investigations. A heterostructure inside each sample serves as the photoacoustic transducer. The frequency of the generated coherent phonons is in the sub-THz range, corresponding to the typical frequency threshold for anomalous phonon transmission. All samples were epitaxially grown with controllable surface morphology. The diverse distribution of the root-mean-square (rms) roughness \( \sigma \), ranging from 2 Å (nearly atomic flatness in comparison with the lattice constant \( c = 5.2 \) Å) to \( \sim 10 \) nm, provides an ideal test platform to examine the roughness effect. Two samples with different structures and \( \sigma \) were adopted to study the phonon scatterings in the low sub-THz regime. One was a GaN-based \( p-n \) junction [Fig. 1(a)] with an atomic-level flat surface (\( \sigma = 0.68 \pm 0.2 \) nm). Sample details were reported before [6]. The other was a 1 \( \mu m \)-thick GaN thin film grown on a Si(111) wafer, as shown in Fig. 1(b). By manipulating growth condition, this epilayer has an irregular surface with \( \sigma = 8.2 \pm 1.7 \) nm.

Figures 2(a) and 2(b) show the measured transient optical reflectivities in these low-frequency samples, where the charged-carrier background was removed for clarity. Clear Brillouin oscillations in the extracted signals are the indication of the detected 117 GHz coherent phonons which are the component of the excited broadband phonon pulses satisfying the optical interference condition. After photoexciting the \( p-n \) junction by blue pumps [Fig. 2(a)], part of the 117 GHz coherent phonons initiated in the depletion region traveled toward the sample surface and then reflected back toward the substrate at \( \sim 150 \) ps. With a limited surface detection region, the round-trip of transport phonons resulted in a symmetric envelope (dashed lines) with a maximum at \( \sim 150 \) ps. High symmetry of this envelope revealed that the coherent phonon intensity was almost unchanged after surface reflection, indicating a SSP near unity (0.99 ± 0.01). The rest part of the signal exhibited an
The high-frequency measurements on different locations concluded that the SSP value decreased from 0.62 to 0.17 when the \( \sigma \) increased from 0.68 to 1.2 nm. This trend is qualitatively consistent with the 117 GHz data, as summarized in Fig. 3. Furthermore, it was noticed that phonons with a higher frequency are much more responsive to the atomic-scale roughness. This fact is disclosed not only by the observed steep increase in the diffuse scattering probability of 890 GHz phonons under a slight increase in \( \sigma \) (0.68–1.2 nm) but also by a remarkable difference in diffuse scatterings (1% versus 38%) between 117 and 890 GHz results with a similar \( \sigma \) of \( \sim 0.68 \) nm.

These experiments qualitatively exhibited a strong connection between sub-THz phonon scattering and surface irregularity. To understand these data, acoustic phonon-boundary interactions were then analyzed theoretically. With flat surfaces (\( \sigma/\lambda < 0.15 \)) and long phonon wavelengths (\( \lambda/c > 15 \)), phonon transport can be treated as wave propagation in continuum media. It is analogous to the continuum acoustic theory adopted in the explanation of heat transport in the low-temperature regime (\( \ll 1 \) K), while the scattering by interface roughness is our concern. Thus, the studied phase-related scattering issue can be modeled as classical waves scattered from rough surfaces. We considered the small slope approximation (SSA) due to its accuracy even with a broad range of scattering angles [11]. The roughness spectrum \( W(K) \) used in the SSA analysis is the modified power law spectrum given by

\[
W(K) = \frac{A}{(K^2l^2 + 1)^3},
\]

where \( A = 2\sigma^2/\pi \) is the spectral strength, and \( K \) and \( l \) are the wave number and the correlation length of surface roughness, respectively. By introducing the corresponding

![FIG. 3 (color online). Specular scattering probability (SSP) as a function of \( \sigma \) measured in four uncapped samples (dots). The 890 GHz data were obtained on different locations of a specific sample, while the other low-frequency data were taken from different samples. The solid (dashed) line depicts the SSA prediction for the scatterings of 117 GHz phonons at the GaN p-n junction (GaN/Si) sample surface where \( l = 24(38) \) nm, while the same theoretical investigation for 890 GHz phonons is represented by the ranged area due to uncertainty in \( l \).]
correlation function into the lowest-order nonlocal SSA, one can obtain the coherent reflection coefficient $r$ formulated in terms of $\sigma$, $l$, phonon wave vector $k$, and the reflection coefficient for a perfectly smooth interface $r_0$ [12]. It is important to know that $(r/r_0)^2$ reveals the intensity loss of the reflected coherent waves and represents the SSP of incident phonons from a particle viewpoint.

Besides the measurement results, Fig. 3 illustrates the corresponding predictions from the SSA. With $r_0 = 1$, the measured $l$ and the normal incidence condition were introduced in the calculation. $l$ was estimated to be 24 (38) nm for the $p$-$n$ junction (GaN/Si) sample. As for the MQW sample, the SSA analysis with such a short $\lambda$ (7.9 nm) strongly depends on nanoscale lateral characteristic of the roughness. Without required precision for the determination of $l$, the SSA provides a ranged prediction for 890 GHz phonons with the consideration of $l>\sigma$. From the figure, the experimental results are found to be satisfactorily consistent with the wave scattering theory. It should be noted that without considering other scattering channels, the SSA calculation concerning only the roughness effect gives the upper bound of the SSP. The quantitative agreement between the theory and the measurements thus shows the fact that interface roughness dominates over other scattering mechanisms for phonon-boundary interactions in the sub-THz frequency range.

Both theory and experiments indicate a specular-to-diffuse transition of phonon scatterings as the surface (frequency) becomes irregular (higher). Our finding facilitates the understanding of the cryogenic heat transport. By considering the properties of typical solid-state surface with $\sigma$ of 1–10 nm and sound velocities of 4–8 nm/ps, the threshold phonon frequency for the specular-to-diffuse transition, defined by SSP = 0.5, can be evaluated to range from several tens to hundreds of GHz. Acoustic phonons in this frequency range govern the thermal conduction at 0.3–10 K. This calculated transition frequency/temperature based on the roughness effect agrees with the reported cryogenic observations on Kapitza anomaly [1–3].

One datum (425 GHz) shown in Fig. 3 should be especially addressed since it was measured with an extremely flat surface ($\sigma \sim 2$ Å, less than the thickness of one monolayer). Without notable irregularity, this datum confirmed the predominance of the specular scatterings at nearly perfect surfaces. Furthermore, the same epitaxial sample was then used to examine the validity of the above conclusion for interfaces between two media. We coated a 330-nm-thick SiO$_2$ cap layer on this sample, and the transmission electron microscopy confirmed the atomically flat and well-bonded interface between GaN and SiO$_2$. The estimated interface roughness was less than one lattice constant of GaN ($\sigma < c$), thus yielding low roughness-induced diffuse scatterings according to the SSA $(r/r_0 > 0.89)$. With such negligible roughness contribution, the effects of other scattering mechanisms at buried interfaces [1] should then be revealed by performing nanoultrasonic experiments [Fig. 2(d)]. The measured coherent reflection coefficient of this GaN/SiO$_2$ interface for 425 GHz phonons is $r/r_0 = 0.91 \pm 0.08$, where $r_0 = 0.575–0.602$ with consideration of uncertainty in the sound velocity of bulk SiO$_2$ [13]. The reasonable agreement between the experiment and the roughness-based scattering theory indicates that no noticeable diffuse scattering is induced by other mechanisms. It thus supports the responsible role of roughness in interface diffuse scatterings, as well as in the anomalous phonon transmission through an interface.

From an application point of view, our finding leads a way to nondestructively probe corrugations of buried interfaces with atomic resolutions, compared with nowadays surface or destructive nanometrologies. The experiment shown in Fig. 2(d) also serves as a demonstration of the proposed nanoultrasonic-based technique, where $\sigma$ of the GaN/SiO$_2$ interface can be estimated by analyzing scattering of the acoustic phonons with the SSA model.

In summary, we report a direct measurement of the SSP of acoustic phonons at epitaxial interfaces. Our observations quantitatively verify that the interface diffuse scattering of sub-THz transport phonons is mainly induced by roughness, which is thus concluded as the dominant mechanism responsible for Kapitza anomaly. This exploration on microscopic phonon-boundary interactions is essential for explaining nowadays observations in cryogenics and further opens a path for noninvasive probing of nanoscale interface irregularity.

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