2007

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Yao, Yan; Chen, Hsiang-Yu; Huang, Jinsong; and Yang, Yang, "Low voltage and fast speed all-polymeric optocouplers" (2007).  
*Mechanical & Materials Engineering Faculty Publications*. 179.  
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Low voltage and fast speed all-polymeric optocouplers

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(Received 14 November 2006; accepted 3 January 2007; published online 1 February 2007)

An all-polymeric optocoupler has been demonstrated with a polymer light-emitting diode (PLED) as the light source (input unit) and a polymer/fullerene photodiode (PD) as the detector (output unit). The electroluminescence (EL) peak of the PLED is 560 nm, and the entire EL spectrum is within the response range of the PD. The optocoupler can work at low driving voltages, 5 V on the PLED and 0 V on the PD. The output photocurrent increases linearly with input current, and the current density transfer ratio reaches 1.5%. The frequency response of the optocoupler is at 500 kHz. With comparable performance to their inorganic counterparts, the all-polymeric optocouplers demonstrated here will bring the technology of organic photonic devices one step closer to commercialization. © 2007 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.2437683]

An optocoupler is a functional device that uses a short optical transmission path to transfer a signal between elements of a circuit, while keeping them electrically isolated. An electrical signal is converted to an optical signal and then back to an electrical signal. The optocouplers prevent electrical noise and voltage transients from interfering with other sections of a device and they are widely used in optoelectronics circuits. As an alternative to conventional inorganic counterparts, organic optoelectronics have attracted increasing attention due to their light weight, low cost, and potential for large area devices.

In recent years, especially after the concept of polymer and fullerene bulk heterojunction was demonstrated, the efficiency of photovoltaic devices has been significantly increased and photodetectors with EQEs higher than 76% have been successfully demonstrated. A significant improvement for PLED has been achieved by using phosphorescent materials and interface engineering and internal quantum efficiency approaching unity was recently reported. However, no work has been carried out to improve the performance of optocouplers. Also little attention has been paid to the response time of optocouplers which is an important figure of merit to determine the highest signal frequency that can be transmitted. One recent report by Dong et al. showed an optocoupler with 6.5 s response time. Obviously the response time is too long and needs to be reduced for practical applications. In this letter, we revisit polymer optocouplers by utilizing a donor-acceptor bulk heterojunction system as the PD, and demonstrate polymer optocouplers working at low driving voltage with high current transfer ratios and fast dynamic response.

The geometric structure and the corresponding circuit diagram of the polymer optocoupler are illustrated in Fig. 1. The input unit is a PLED with the structure of ITO/PEDOT:PSS/P3HT:PCBM/Ca/Al, where PEDOT:PSS is poly(ethylenedioxythiophene):polystyrene sulfonate and PF is polyfluorene consisting of 5 wt % poly(9,9-dioctyfluorene-co-benzothiadiazole) and 95 wt % poly(9,9-dioctylfluorene). PEDOT:PSS, PF, and 0.2% Cs2CO3 (in 2-ethoxyethanol) were spin coated onto the substrate layer by layer. Before coating Cs2CO3 layer, the device was heated at 60 C for 30 min. 80 nm thick Al was thermally deposited as the cathode after spin coating the Cs2CO3 layer. The output unit is a PD with the structure of ITO/PEDOT:PSS/P3HT:PCBM/Ca/Al, where P3HT is poly(3-hexylthiophene) and PCBM is (6,6)-phenyl-C61-butyric acid methyl ester. The active layer was spun cast from a blend solution of P3HT and PCBM (1:1 weight ratio, P3HT concentration = 20 mg/ml) at 1000 rpm for 30 s, then covered with a Petri dish and dried slowly (see Ref. 17 for details). A Ca/Al electrode with the thickness of 20/80 nm was deposited subsequently by thermal evaporation. Finally, the PLED and photodiode were aligned carefully and glued together by index matching epoxy. The active areas of PLED and photodiode are 12 and 2 mm2, respectively, and the choice of smaller PD size allows us to achieve faster response due to smaller capacitance. The entire device was wrapped in black tape to prevent interference from the environment.

The input unit of the optocoupler was characterized by a source-measure meter (Keithley 2400) and a calibrated silicon photodiode. The brightness was measured using a spectrophotometer (Photo Research PR650). Current-voltage (I-V) and luminescence-voltage (L-V) curves are plotted in Fig. 2(a). It is found that the device shows current turn-on voltage at 2.0 V and light turn-on voltage at 2.2 V, corresponding to the injection of holes and electrons, respectively. The inset shows the electroluminescence (EL) intensity dependence on the input current, which is proportional for more than three orders. The PD was characterized under illumination (100 mW/cm2) using a Thermo-Oriel solar simulator. The I-V characteristic is shown in Fig. 2(b) with the short circuit current density of 10.0 mA/cm2. In the inset of Fig. 2(b), short circuit current density is linearly proportional to light intensity for more than three orders. Figure 2(c) shows the EL spectrum of the PLED with a peak centered at 560 nm and EQE of the photodiode, which is around 60% from 400 to 650 nm. By optimizing the materials selection...
process, all the photons emitted by the PLED contribute to
the photocurrent of the PD, and the spectral overlap increases
from an earlier value of 65% (Ref. 8) to 100%.

Figure 3(a) plots the dependence of the output current of
the PD ($I_{out}$) measured using a semiconductor parameter ana-
lyzer (HP 4155C) on the input voltage to the PLED ($V_{in}$). When
$V_{in}$ is less than the PLED turn-on voltage, $I_{out}$ is con-
stant around 100 pA, which corresponds to the device dark
current and is defined as $I_{OFF}$. $I_{out}$ increases sharply when the
PLED is turned on at 2.2 V, and reaches 50 nA at 8 V. If
$I_{out}$ is defined as $I_{ON}$ when $V_{in}$ is 5 V, the $I_{ON}/I_{OFF}$ value of
the optocoupler is around 10^5, which is sufficiently high to
be used in digital circuits. The driving voltage (5 V) is also
compatible with transistor-transistor logic (TTL) and
complementary metal-oxide-semiconductor (CMOS) cir-
cuits.

In Ref. 8, the PD uses a pure polymer as an active layer
and the photocurrent increases dramatically with reverse
bias, hence the PD needs to be operated at −10 V for high
EQE.8 On the contrary, the photocurrent of the PD in this
study [shown in Fig. 2(b)] shows only slight dependence on reverse bias. Our recent study on the self-organization in-
duced ordering effect in the P3HT/PCBM blend films re-
vealed that the e-h pair dissociation efficiency was more than
80% under short circuit (SC) conditions.18 The high effi-
ciency value and field independent behavior suggest that PD

FIG. 1. (Color online) Schematic structure and corresponding circuit of the optocoupler.

FIG. 2. (a) Current-luminance-voltage characteristic of PLED. Inset: luminance vs current. (b) J-V characteristic of the photodiode under AM1.5G 100 mW/cm² illumination. Inset: short-circuit current density ($J_{sc}$) dependence on the incident light intensity. (c) EL spectrum of PLED and EQE for the photodiode.
oscilloscope

Transient behavior of a PD with one report showing 0.8 μs rise time for the photodiode under no bias condition. Current of the photodiode (I_{in}) vs voltage of the PLED (V_{in}). Inset: current transfer ratio vs I_{in}. A wave form generator (Waveteck 195) provides square wave forms of different frequencies that serve as input signal (I_{in}). To measure the dynamic response of I_{out}, the photocurrent is amplified by a high bandwidth transimpedance amplifier (Femto DLPCA-200) and is displayed on an oscilloscope (Tektronix TDS 460A). Figure 4(b) shows that I_{out} follows I_{in} in the time domain nicely at a modulation frequency of 500 KHz. The rise and fall times of the photocurrent are around 0.5 μs, which are seven orders faster than the previously reported value. This is by far one of the best results for polymer optocouplers and there is still room for improvement, such as selection of materials with higher charge carrier mobility and reduction of RC time by decreasing device capacitance.

In summary, a polymer optocoupler with high CTR and fast rise time was demonstrated. The linear relationship between the output and input currents, together with high I_{ON}/I_{OFF}, qualifies the optocoupler for use in both analog and digital circuits. The optocoupler can be operated at low voltage (<5 V) and thus is compatible with both TTL and CMOS devices. Our results show that the polymer optocouplers have comparable performance to their inorganic counterparts and have bright future for commercial application.

The authors would like to thank Liping Ma for many useful discussions and Matthew Allen for proofreading this letter. This work was supported by the Solamer Energy, Inc. (Grant No. 20061880) and the University of California Discovery matching grant (Grant No. GCP05-10208).

7MRS Bull. 30(1) (2005), special issue on organic-based photovoltaics.