Enhancement of Current Gain at High Collector Current Densities for Silicon-Germanium Heterojunction Bipolar Transistors

In this work, an NPN Si/SiGe/SiGe graded heterojunction bipolar transistor has been compared with contemporary NPN Si/SiGe/Si double heterojunction bipolar transistor for current gain performance at high collector current densities, using a 2-dimensional device simulator. The analysis predicts that the base-collector homojunction of the first transistor device structure is responsible for improved current gain at high collector current density in comparison with the conventional transistor device and provides the option of operation at higher collector current densities.

Keywords: SiGe DHBT; SiGe GHBT; Current gain; Linear tapering

Received: 6 January 2019; Accepted: 25 February 2020

1. Introduction

A bipolar junction transistor (BJT) can be represented by a two-diode n-p-n or p-n-p structure shown in Fig. (1), which also defines the symbols and the three terminals of the devices (emitter, base and collector) plus the terminal voltages and currents.

The arrow on the emitter lead serves two purposes. First, it distinguishes between the collector and emitter terminals which normally cannot be interchanged. Second, the arrow denotes the direction of conventional current flow through the device, providing discrimination between the symbol for the n-p-n transistor and its p-n-p counterpart.

In normal operation, the emitter-base junction is forward biased and the collector-base junction reverse biased. For the schematic n-p-n structure of Fig. (2a), electrons are injected from the n-type emitter into the base and, at the same time, holes are injected from base to emitter. To improve device efficiency, the doping level of the base region is made much lower than that of the emitter; essentially only electron current flows across the emitter-base junction with the injection level controlled (exponentially) by the base-emitter forward bias potential ($V_{BE}$), as

$$I_E \propto \exp \left( \frac{qV_{BE}}{kT} \right)$$

(1)

Electrons injected from the emitter become minority carriers in the p-type base and, since the collector-base junction is reverse biased, these minority carriers which cross the base by diffusion are swept across the collector-base transition region.

Because the electrons spend a finite time in transit through the base region, some recombine with holes; the holes involved in this recombination are replaced by positive charge flow into the base (via its...
connection to the bias source) resulting in a base current ($I_b$).

Operation of the transistor may be summarized by reference to Fig. (2b). The electron current at the collector is almost all of the current injected from the emitter diminished only by that lost as base current due to recombination. This consideration neglects hole injection from base to emitter and hole leakage from collector to base, both of which contribute to device current and hence degrade total efficiency.

The term bipolar is applied to junction transistors of the type described above since two types of charge carrier (holes and electrons) are involved in the operation of the device. Unipolar, or field-effect, transistors rely on only one type of carrier.

![Fig. (2) (a) Schematic structures n-p-n BJTs, and (b) current notation of BJT operation](image)

Silicon-Germanium technology provides the option of band gap engineering along with the compatibility with the present day silicon process technology and hence provides the option of integrating the SiGe technology for advancement of present day device field. Extremely high cut-off frequency of 30 GHz and maximum frequency of oscillation of 50 GHz in the Si/SiGe/Si NPN double heterojunction bipolar transistors (DHBTs) had already been reported for use in mobile communication applications [1]. One important aspect of operation of SiGe devices is their requirement of operation at high current densities to achieve high cut-off frequency performance. Moreover, the scaling down of present day electronic devices forces the operation of these devices at very high collector current densities ($> 10^5$ A/cm$^2$). Therefore, the operation and performance of SiGe heterostructure transistors at high collector current densities is of prime concern for the microelectronics researchers and process engineers.

It has been already reported that the NPN Si/SiGe/Si DHBT structures exhibit rapid fall in the current gain at high collector current densities [2]. This rapid fall in the current gain leads to the fall in transistor efficiency and make it impractical for use at high collector current densities. The degraded current gain at high collector current densities in DHBT structures is attributed to the formation of retarding potential barrier for electrons at base-collector junction. The velocity saturation of electrons in collector and the valence band offset for holes at base-collector junction leads to the formation of retarding potential barrier. The analysis of NPN Si/SiGe/Si DHBT structure by Cottrel and Yu [2] shows the drop in the collector current density curve as the forward base-emitter bias exceeds approximately 0.77V, predicting a sharp falloff in current gain of the transistor above 0.77V. Therefore, some alternate HBT structures without valence band offset for holes at base-collector junction need to be evolved for improving the transistor current gain and efficiency at high collector currents.

In the present work, the conventional NPN SiGe DHBT structure with uniform 20 at% of germanium in base is simulated to supplement the earlier reported results on the formation of retarding potential barrier. These results are used as the basis for comparing the structures evolved to improve the current gain at high current densities. The objective has been to transform the base-collector heterojunction with the closest approximation to homojunction. Therefore, in the present work the GHBT structure with a uniform Ge at% in base region and a linearly graded germanium at% in collector has been chosen with a perfect homojunction at base-collector metallurgical junction. The base-collector homojunction completely inhibits the formation of retarding potential barrier due to valence band offset and the grading of germanium ensures the strained behavior and stability of the SiGe layers [3]. A further advantage of choosing the NPN GHBT structure lies in the fact that the process of growing a box-type uniform SiGe base layer over a linearly graded SiGe collector region is more practical to achieve dislocation free strained base and collector SiGe layers.

A two-dimensional MEDICI device simulator, known for its authenticated results at the device level for SiGe HBT structures [4], has been used in the present analysis and the high doping and electric field models have been included. The performance of both the HBT structures for current gain is compared and authenticated by investigating the conduction band electron energy, net carrier concentration profiles, metallurgical junction, and dependence of collector current density on base-emitter bias voltage. A theoretical formulation has been provided to supplement the improved performance obtained in the proposed Si/SiGe/SiGe heterostructure in comparison with SiGe DHBT structure.
2. Theory

In NPN silicon BJT the finite electron concentration \( n_e \) in collector-base space charge layer is necessary to sustain the flow of collector current in the transistor. An expression relating the electron density \( n_e \) with the collector current density \( J_c \) for the constant drift velocity \( v_{dual} \) condition is given as [5]:

\[
J_c = q v_{dual} n_e
\]  
\( (2) \)

At sufficiently high collector current density the high electron concentration in the space charge region of collector lowers the potential barrier at base-collector junction. This leads to the onset of Kirk phenomenon [5] where the base-collector junction shifts into the collector space-charge region resulting in the vertical widening of the effective neutral base region width. The total voltage across base-collector junction \( V_{bc(0)} \) is the sum of built-in potential barrier at base-collector junction \( (V_{b0}) \) and the terminal base-collector voltage \( V_{bc} \). At the onset of Kirk phenomenon, (at Kirk current density \( J_k \), the electron density in base-collector space charge region, \( n_c \), (\( n_s \), electron density at start of Kirk effect), is related with the device parameters and \( V_{bc(0)} \) by the expression:

\[
n_c = N_c + \left( \frac{2e V_{bc(0)}}{q W_c^2} \right) \]  
\( (3) \)

where \( N_c \) is the collector-doping concentration, \( e \) is the dielectric constant for Si, \( q \) is the electronic charge and \( W_c \) is the collector width as now whole collector width corresponds to space charge region.

In Si BJT, at the onset of Kirk phenomenon, holes are injected into the collector from the base to compensate the electron charge in collector, resulting in the formation of the current induced base. However, for SiGe DHBTs having a sizable alloy mole fraction, there is a valence band discontinuity for holes at base-collector junction. This valence band discontinuity suppresses the hole injection into the collector as \( n_s \), exceeds \( n_c \), eventually, there will be an accumulation of mobile electrons in collector due to velocity saturation and an accumulation of holes in base due to valence band offset at base-collector junction. The combination of these mobile electrons together with localized holes form a dipole layer and in turn give rise to an electric field \( E_0 \). A further increase in the collector current density will consequently increase the dipole strength and increases the electric field \( E_0 \). The presence of the electric field \( E_0 \) at base-collector heterojunction gives rise to a retarding potential barrier \( (V_{bp}) \) in conduction band, which would oppose the electrons flowing from emitter to collector through base. An increased electron density in the base at base-collector junction \( n_s \) is now required to support and maintain the electron density \( n_c \) and collector current density \( J_c \). The electron density \( n_e \), in base-collector space charge region for collector density \( J_c \), in SiGe DHBT derived from the basic Poisson’s equation is:

\[
n_c = N_c + \left( \frac{2e V_{bc(0)}}{q W_c^2} \right) \]  
\( (4) \)

The electron density in base at base-collector junction \( n_s \) required to maintain the \( n_e \) inside base-collector space charge region is simply given by using current continuity and Boltzmann statistics across the retarding potential barrier \( V_{bp} \):

\[
n_s(kT) = n_c \exp \left( \frac{q V_{bp}}{kT} \right) \]  
\( (5) \)

where \( kT/q = V_T \) is the thermal voltage.

The retarding potential barrier \( V_{bp} \) for electrons can be expressed as:

\[
V_{bp} = \Delta E_v + KT \ln \left( \frac{J_c}{q V_{dual} N_b} - \frac{N_c}{N_b} - \frac{2e V_{bc(0)}}{q N_b W_c^2} \right) \]  
\( (6) \)

where \( \Delta E_v \) is the valence band discontinuity for holes and \( N_b \) is the neutral base width. Solving Eq. (4), (5) and (6) for a uniformly doped base gives the effect of bias dependent retarding potential barrier \( V_{bp} \) and base-emitter biasing \( V_{be} \) on the collector current density \( J_c \) as:

\[
J_c = \left( \frac{q D_n n_s^2}{W_b N_b} \right) \left( \frac{v_{be} + \Delta E_v - V_{bp}}{KT} \right)^2 \]  
\( (7) \)

where, \( n_s \) is the intrinsic carrier concentration. The modified value of electron density in base at emitter-base junction \( n_s \) in term of \( V_{bp} \) is expressed as:

\[
n_s = \left( n_s \left( v_{dual} W_b \right) + n_c \exp \left( \frac{q V_{bp}}{kT} \right) \right) \]  
\( (8) \)

where \( n_s \left( v_{dual} W_b / D_n \right) \) is the electron density in the base at the base-emitter junction corresponding to the electron density in base-collector space-charge region \( n_c \). The second term in Eq. (8), \( n_c \exp (q V_{bp} / kT) \) is the electron density in base at the base-emitter junction as a result of increased electron concentration in base at base-collector junction because of the retarding potential barrier at base-collector junction.

The relation of the effective band offset \( \delta E_v \) and valence band discontinuity \( \Delta E_v \) with \( n_s \) for a specific \( J_c \) is expressed as:
\[ V_{be} = \left[ V_i \ln \left( \frac{n_i^2}{n_i^0} \right) + \left( \frac{n_i^0 N_b}{n_i^2} \right) \right] - \frac{\delta(E_v)}{q} \]  

(9)

The substitution of the expression for \( n_i^0 \) from the Eq. (8) in Eq. (9) predicts the necessity for an increase in \( V_{be} \) to account for the increase in \( n_i^0 \) required to sustain the collector current density \( J_c \). This requirement of increase in \( V_{be} \) for a given collector current density \( J_c \) will be reflected as a fall in the current gain of the DHBT structure. This prediction is consistent with the discussion of Eq. (7) where an increase in retarding potential barrier \( V_{bp} \) at high collector current density predicts a fall in the DHBT collector current density \( J_c \) and current gain.

The analysis of SiGe DHBT illustrates the formation of retarding potential barrier at base-collector junction due to valence band offset for holes. The theory also predicts a fall in the current gain at high collector current density as a consequence of this retarding potential \( V_{bp} \). Whereas, the proposed GHBT structure with uniform Ge profile in base and grading of Ge at% in collector avoids the retarding potential barrier for electrons at base collector homojunction. Consequently, this structure promises an improved current gain at high collector current density in comparison with SiGe DHBT structure.

3. Simulation Results for SiGe DHBT and GHBT Structures

The current gain performance of the NPN Si/SiGe/Si DHBT and proposed NPN Si/SiGe/SiGe heterostructure is compared for identical device dimensions, doping densities and bias conditions. The surface emitter doping of \( 5 \times 10^{19} \) cm\(^{-3} \) and its thickness \( W_e \) of 0.2 \( \mu \)m is chosen to provide ohmic contact. The emitter doping of \( 1 \times 10^{19} \) cm\(^{-3} \) and its thickness \( W_e \) of 0.1 \( \mu \)m is selected to lower the emitter-base. The base thickness \( W_b \) of 0.05 \( \mu \)m with a uniform base doping of \( 8 \times 10^{15} \) cm\(^{-3} \) is chosen in both the structures. The collector doping of \( 10^{17} \) cm\(^{-3} \) and thickness \( W_c \) of 0.45 \( \mu \)m have been chosen in both the structures.

The germanium profile in different regions of Si/SiGe/Si DHBT and Si/SiGe/SiGe HBT structures is shown in Fig. (3). An optimized mole fraction of germanium has been chosen to retain the strained behavior and stability of SiGe regions [3]. A uniform 20 at% Ge has been chosen in the base of conventional Si/SiGe/Si Double HBT (DHBT) structure, whereas its collector does not contain any germanium mole fraction. The base-collector homojunction, in the proposed Si/SiGe/SiGe Graded HBT (GHBT) structure has been ensured by choosing a uniform 20 at% Ge in base and tapering it linearly to zero at% Ge at the collector ohmic contact.

The chosen operating conditions of SiGe DHBT and GHBT structure ensures the performance evaluation in the high collector current density region (>\( 10^{5} \) A/cm\(^2 \)). The simulation results on conduction band electron energy for both the structures include the influence of valence band offset for holes and bandgap narrowing due to the heavily doped base. The electron energy profile shown in Fig. (4), for the collector current density of \( 9.22 \times 10^{5} \) A/cm\(^2 \), predict the total retarding potential barrier \( V_{bp} \) of approx. 0.09eV for the conduction band electrons at the base-collector heterojunction in the SiGe DHBT structure. The valence band offset for holes at base-collector heterojunction is observed to contribute 0.06 eV in the total retarding potential barrier in the DHBT structure. This is obtained by excluding the influence of heavy doping effect on band gap narrowing in the base. The simulated result is consistent with the retarding potential barrier of approximately 0.058 eV obtained by solving Eq. (6) for SiGe DHBT accounting only for the valence band offset for holes. Whereas, the formation of such a retarding potential barrier (due to valence band offset for holes) is prohibited by the base-collector homojunction in the GHBT structure. Therefore the simulation results shown in Fig. (4), for the collector current density of \( 1.6 \times 10^{6} \) A/cm\(^2 \) in the GHBT structure, exhibits a small potential barrier of 0.03 eV, which is solely attributed to the high doping in the base. The retarding potential barrier of 0.06 eV in the DHBT structure leads to accumulation of mobile electrons at base-collector heterojunction.
The variation of net carrier concentration with the vertical depth of the SiGe DHBT and SiGe GHBT structures for the chosen bias conditions is shown in Fig. (5). A net carrier concentration of 8.11x10^{19} and 3.93x10^{19} cm^{-3} is obtained in the base of DHBT structure at emitter-base and base-collector junctions, respectively. This corresponds to an electron concentration of 4.36x10^{19} cm^{-3} and 2.92x10^{19} cm^{-3} in the base of DHBT structure at the corresponding metallurgical junctions. Whereas, a lower net carrier concentration of 6.34x10^{18} cm^{-3}, which corresponds to an electron concentration of 1.86x10^{19} cm^{-3}, is obtained, for a higher collector current density of 1.6x10^{6} A/cm^{2} at base-collector junction in the base of GHBT structure. The simulation results predict an electron concentration of 3.07x10^{19} cm^{-3} at the emitter-base junction in GHBT structure.

This increase in electron concentration at both the metallurgical junctions in the base of DHBT forces the requirement of an associated increase in base-emitter biasing voltage \( V_{be} \).

The dependence of collector current density \( J_c \) on the base-emitter bias voltage \( V_{be} \), for the DHBT and GHBT structures, is shown in Fig. (6). The results predict the requirement of base-emitter bias voltage of 1.1 V for the DHBT and 0.97 V for the GHBT structure to sustain the collector current density of 9.22x10^{5} A/cm^{2}. The base-emitter bias voltage for the GHBT structure is observed to increase linearly with the collector current density. Whereas, the collector current density for the DHBT structure approximately saturates above the base-emitter bias voltage of 0.98V. Therefore, at higher collector current densities the DHBT structure needs higher base-emitter bias voltage in comparison with GHBT structure, for sustaining the same collector current density, which will adversely influence the current gain of DHBT in comparison with GHBT structure.

The dependence of current gain on the collector current density for the DHBT and the GHBT structure is shown in Fig. (7). The monotonically decaying behavior of current gain in both the structures for the collector current densities less than 4.0 x 10^{5} A/cm^{2} is attributed to the Kirk effect [5] and high-level injection of minority carriers in the base. At higher collector current densities (>4.0x10^{5} A/cm^{2}), the current gain in the GHBT structure falls to 72% of its initial value for twofold change in the current density. Whereas, the current gain in the DHBT structure falls to 10% for twofold change in the collector current density. Therefore, the DHBT shows a sharp fall-off in the current gain in comparison with GHBT structure as the collector current density increases. The results are consistent with fall in the current gain in DHBT structure, predicted by Eq. (7), due to the formation of retarding potential barrier at base-collector junction in the DHBT structure. The results establish superior current gain performance of the GHBT structure in comparison with the DHBT device. Although the results presented in the present work are for the pre-selected doping profiles and
physical parameters of the device but the phenomena of better performance of the GHBT structure over contemporary DHBT structures will be consistent with other device configurations and doping profiles.

![Graph showing current gain versus collector current density for NPN SiGe DHBT and GHBT](image)

**Fig. (7)** Current gain versus collector current density plot for NPN SiGe DHBT and GHBT

### 4. Conclusions

An NPN SiGe GHBT structure with uniform 20 at% germanium in the base and tapering it linearly to zero at% Ge at the collector ohmic contact is proposed to improve the current gain performance of the SiGe HBTs at high collector current densities. The base-collector homojunction inhibits the formation of retarding potential barrier due to absence of valence band offset for holes at base-collector metallurgical junction and 20 at% of germanium and its tapering ensures the strained behavior and stability of the SiGe layers. The absence of retarding potential barrier in SiGe GHBT is observed to provide better current gain performance at high collector current densities in comparison with DHBT structure. A theoretical model for SiGe DHBT has been developed to supplement the simulation results for current gain dependence on the physical parameters and device structure. A comparison of conduction band electron energy, net carrier concentration profile and dependence of collector current density on the base emitter voltage has been provided for the SiGe HBT structures. The theoretical formulation and the simulated results on the current gain performance establish the superiority of the GHBT structure in comparison with the DHBT device configuration at high collector current densities.

### References


