Small divergence edge-emitting semiconductor lasers with two-dimensional plasmonic collimators

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Using quantum cascade lasers with a two-dimensional metallic aperture-grating structure defined on the facet the authors demonstrate a collimated laser beam with small divergence angle perpendicular and parallel to the laser waveguide layers (2.7° and 3.7°, respectively). These values represent a reduction by a factor of ~30 and ~10, respectively, compared to those of the original 8.06-μm-wavelength laser without plasmonic collimation. The devices preserve good room temperature performance with output power as high as 53% of that of the original unpatterned lasers. © 2008 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.3009599]

Edge-emitting semiconductor lasers suffer from a large intrinsic beam divergence, caused by their small aperture size. The divergence angle θ of a beam emitted by an aperture of dimension L scales approximately as λ/L, where λ is the free space wavelength. The full width at half maximum (FWHM) divergence angles in directions normal and parallel to the waveguide layers are denoted as θ⊥ and θ∥; they typically range from 30° to 80° and from 20° to 60°, respectively, for edge-emitting semiconductor lasers. A much smaller divergence would be invaluable for many applications, such as facilitating coupling of the laser output into optical fibers and waveguides, and free space communications, ranging, and remote sensing.

Lezec et al., demonstrated that a plasmonic aperture-groove structure defined in a suspended metal film can collimate incident light.1 Since then, there have been a few attempts to integrate this structure with an active device.2,3 Recently, we demonstrated a very small beam divergence in the laser polarization direction for quantum cascade lasers (QCLs) by patterning the facet with a suitable metallic structure consisting of an aperture and an adjacent one-dimensional (1D) grating.4 In this letter, we extend this idea and show that by defining a plasmonic two-dimensional (2D) pattern on the laser facet, we are able to achieve 2D collimation for linearly-polarized edge-emitting semiconductor lasers. Midinfrared QCLs are used as the model system; the fabricated devices preserved good room temperature performance with an output power as high as 53% of that of the original unpatterned devices.

Our 2D plasmonic collimator consists of a subwavelength aperture opened on the laser active region and an array of half rings centered on the aperture; see Fig. 1(a) for a sketch of the design.

Beam collimation in the fabricated devices is essentially an interference effect: the aperture couples the laser output into surface plasmons (SPs), while the half-ring pattern functions as a 2D ensemble of scatterers that coherently radiate the energy of the SPs into the far field; radiation from the aperture and from the scattered SPs interfere constructively, leading to increased intensity in a small solid angle.

The choice of the size of the aperture results from a trade-off between power outflow and divergence. On the one hand, a large aperture let more power to emerge from the laser cavity. On the other hand, in order to achieve 2D collimation, the aperture needs to be subwavelength so that the SPs propagating along the laser facet have a sufficiently large divergence angle. Collimation in the directions normal and parallel to the laser material layers is only effective if the SPs cover a large distance on the facet in both directions without significant attenuation. An optimal choice of the aperture size will depend on the application envisioned for the devices. We used finite-element simulations (COMSOL Multiphysics) to study the dependence of the device performance on the aperture size. Figure 1(b) shows the evolution of the SP divergence angles (FWHM) with the lateral aperture size [w1 in Fig. 1(a)] for λ=8.06 μm devices. The results show that as long as w1 is smaller than λ, one can get substantial SP diffraction. Figure 1(c) plots the intensity of the SPs for a device with a w1×w2=4×2 μm2 aperture, showing that the SPs are spreading widely on the laser facet. In all the simulations, we kept the vertical aperture size w2 constant around 2 μm, which is nearly equal to the laser active region thickness. We chose not to enlarge w2 because the laser mode is confined in the active core with a cross section of 2.1 × 9.7 μm2 in the vertical and lateral directions. w2 larger than the active region thickness will quickly reduce the efficiency of coupling into SPs because it reduces the overlapping between the laser mode and the edges of the aperture.

The plasmonic pattern was chosen to be ringlike in order to match its shape to the SP wavefront. Simulations confirmed that for the aperture shape and size considered (rectangular with w1 between 2 and 10 μm and w2=2 μm), the SP wavefront is approximately circular [for instance, see Fig. 1(c)]. The period of the rings was designed to match the SP wavelength of the patterned metal surface (second order grating) so that the collimated beam is normal to the laser facet in the far field in a manner analogous to the 1D plasmonic collimation.4 It is preferable to have as many rings as possible in order to concentrate light into a smaller solid angle. The limiting factor is the propagation distance of SPs whose
energy is dissipated by heat generation in the metal and scattering by the surface roughness and the grating grooves. At midinfrared wavelengths, SPs are able to propagate over a few hundreds of microns, which allows us to fabricate up to tens of rings. We performed simulations to adjust the ring width and depth to maximize the intensity of the collimated beam. The diameter of the first ring \( r_1 \) was tuned to achieve maximum constructive interference between the beam directly emerging from the aperture and the ones scattered by the ring grooves. Since the complete understanding of the field in the near zone around a metallic aperture is still subjected to debate, we used simulations to help determine \( r_1 \).

A list of the optimized design parameters, including grating period, width and depth of grooves, and radius of the first ring groove, is presented in the caption of Fig. 2.

To fabricate the devices, first focus ion beam (FIB) milling was used to define ring grooves in the semiconductor; second a 200-nm-thick alumina film was deposited onto the laser facet for electrical insulation, followed by deposition of a 600-nm-thick gold film; finally FIB milling was used again to open the aperture by removing a piece of gold film in front of the laser active region. Multiangle deposition was implemented such that the walls of the grooves are also covered by alumina and gold films. We report experimental and simulation results demonstrating 2D collimation for buried heterostructure (BHT) \( \lambda = 8.06 \, \mu m \) QCLs grown by metal organic vapor-phase epitaxy.

Systematic experiments were performed to study the evolution of the beam divergence angles \( \theta_x \) and \( \theta_y \) and the output power as the lateral aperture size \( w_1 \) is enlarged in steps using FIB milling. An electron micrograph of the facet of a representative device is shown in Fig. 2(a). It was patterned with 20 rings and the aperture size \( w_1 \times w_2 = 2.1 \times 1.9 \, \mu m^2 \). The measured far-field intensity distributions, Fig. 2(b), show that the device has divergence.
angles $\theta_\perp$ and $\theta_i$ equal to 2.7° and 3.7°, respectively. These are substantial reduction in the beam divergence in comparison to that of the original devices with unpatterned facet: $\theta_\perp = 74°$ and $\theta_i = 42°$. To evidence the role of the collimation grating, simulations were performed showing that $\theta_\perp = 128°$ and $\theta_i = 104°$ for a structure with just a $2.1 \times 1.9 \mu m^2$ aperture and without any grating. Our far-field measurement setup is described in Ref. 4. It is observed from Fig. 2(c), the line scans of Fig. 2(b), that the level of the optical background outside the central beam is less than 10% of the peak intensity of the central beam. As a figure of merit we use the concept of antenna directivity to characterize the collimation of the device. Directivity is defined as $D = 10 \log_10(2\pi I_{\text{peak}}/I_{\text{total}})$, where $I_{\text{peak}}$ is the far-field peak intensity and $I_{\text{total}}$ is the total intensity under the 2D far-field beam profile. We calculate based on our experimental results that $D$ is approximately 26.9 dB for the device with 20 rings, while $D$ is only about 8.3 dB for the original unpatterned lasers. The beam quality factor ($M^2$ factor) of the device is determined to be about 2.0 in both vertical and lateral directions based on measurements on the variation of the beam waist along the propagation direction.

The $\lambda=8.06 \mu m$ BHT devices have multiple longitudinal modes and a higher driving current $I_{dr}$ usually corresponds to a larger laser spectrum width $\Delta \lambda$. For instance, for the device with 20 rings, $\Delta \lambda$ is approximately 0.05 $\mu m$ at $I_{dr}=500 mA$; $\Delta \lambda$ broadens to about 0.3 $\mu m$ at $I_{dr}=600 mA$ and keeps around 0.3 $\mu m$ at higher $I_{dr}$. One would expect that the collimation of the patterned devices will get worse for a broader spectrum because the period of the ring grating is matched only with the central lasing wavelength. However, we found that the far-field divergence angles measured were relatively stable at different driving currents: $\theta_\perp = 2.6°$ and $\theta_i = 3.7°$ for $I_{dr}=500 mA$; $\theta_\perp = 2.7°$ and $\theta_i = 3.7°$ for $I_{dr} = 600 mA$. The directivities $D$ at these currents were found to be around 27 dB. These observations demonstrate that the ring collimator design is quite robust with respect to spectral broadening. We are investigating the reasons behind this phenomenon.

As mentioned above, a trade-off needs to be made between the achievable divergence angles and the output power. The device reported in Figs. 2(a)–2(c) with a $w_i \times w_\perp = 2.1 \times 1.9 \mu m^2$ aperture and 20 rings have desirable far-field performance but its power output is only around 20% of that of the original device [Fig. 2(d)]. We proceeded to increase $w_i$ to 5.0 $\mu m$ and eventually to 8.1 $\mu m$ to boost the power throughput; the corresponding maximum output power of the device was increased to 37% and 53% of that of the original laser; see Fig. 2(d) for the measured light output versus current characteristics. The counterpart of the increased output power is the broadening of the central beam in the lateral direction due to the narrowing of the 3P divergence on the laser facet. We found that $\theta_\perp$ and $\theta_i$ follow a trend in good agreement with our simulation results (Fig. 3): with an increasing $w_i$, $\theta_\perp$ increases first slowly and then relatively fast while $\theta_i$ is nearly a constant. For instance, $\theta_\perp$ equals to 2.7°, 2.7°, and 2.4°, $\theta_i$ equals to 3.7°, 3.7°, and 4.6° when $w_i$ was increased from 2.1 to 5.0, and finally to 8.1 $\mu m$.

In conclusion, we have performed systematic experiments and simulations to demonstrate that the integration of a suitably designed 2D aperture-grating structure on the facet of QCLs reduces the beam divergence angles by a factor up to ~30 and ~10 in the vertical and lateral directions, respectively, down to 2.7° and 3.7°. The fabricated devices preserve a significant output power. We plan to investigate optimized aperture shapes to enhance the output power and extend the concept of plasmonic collimation to visible and near-infrared edge-emitting laser diodes and VCSELs.

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