Optical fiber sensor based on the short-range surface plasmon polariton mode

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An optical fiber sensor for ultrathin layer sensing based on short-range surface plasmon polariton (SRSSP) is proposed, and the sensing characteristics are theoretically analyzed. Simulation results indicate that even for a detecting layer much thinner than the vacuum wavelength, a resolution as high as 3.7×10⁻⁶ RIU can be obtained. Moreover, an average thickness-detection sensitivity of 6.2 dB/nm is obtained, which enables the sensor to detect the thickness variation of the ultrathin layer up to tens of nanometers. The sensitive region of thickness could be adjusted by tuning the structure parameters.

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Surface plasmon polariton (SPP) is a transverse magnetic surface electromagnetic wave that propagates along the interface of a metal and a dielectric medium[1]. Given the high sensitivity of the metal surface to changes in the refractive index of the substance[2], SPPs have shown great potential for chemical and biological sensing[3–6]. Optical fiber SPP sensors, which possess a myriad of advantages, (e.g., small size, high sensitivity, affordability, ease of manufacture, and potential for remote sensing), have attracted considerable attention. However, detection of bio- or chemical molecules requires the detecting layer to be about hundreds or tens of nanometers, which is thinner compared with the field size of a conventional SPP mode. The effective sensitivity of a conventional fiber optic SPP sensor would degrade dramatically upon application for ultrathin layer sensing[7].

The short-range SPP (SRSSP) mode is a SPP mode confined on a relatively thin metal film. Owing to the highly bounded field on the metal film[2], SRSSP has been adopted to improve the effective sensitivity of the sensor for ultrathin layer detection[7–10]. In this letter, a SRSSP mode is introduced into the optical fiber sensor, which aims to improve sensitivity for ultrathin layer detection. The operational principle and sensing characteristics of this sensor based on SRSSP modes are analyzed theoretically. Results showed that even for a detecting layer as thin as one-eighth of wavelength, the sensing resolution could reach as high as 3.7×10⁻⁶ RIU (refractive index units). Moreover, the sensor is also applicable for detecting thickness variations in the ultrathin layer. For a detection layer with thickness of tens of nanometers, the average thickness-detection sensitivity is 6.2 dB/nm, and the sensitive region of the detecting layer thickness can be extensively adjusted by varying the structural parameters.

Figure 1 shows the proposed optical fiber sensor based on SRSSP mode, which comprises three regions, namely, the input region I (z < 0), output region III (z > L), and the sensing region II (0 < z < L). The operating wavelength λ₀ is 1550 nm. Meanwhile, region II is composed of a D-shaped single-mode fiber (SMF) (core radius r_cor = 5 μm, residual radius r_res = 4 μm), a SiO₂ dielectric layer (refractive index n_d = 1.444[11] and thickness h_d = 0.5 μm), and an Au film (dielectric constant ε_m = -132 + i×12.65[11] and thickness h_m is initially fixed at 34 nm). Above the Au film is the detecting layer with varying refractive indices n_det and thicknesses h_det. Different from the conventional SPP fiber sensor, a dielectric layer is introduced beneath the Au film, thereby applying the SRSSP mode in the sensor for ultrathin layer sensing.

The working principle of the proposed sensor is similar to that of the hybrid coupler based sensor on a chip[7,9,10]. If the refractive index of detecting layer is far from that of the hybrid coupler based sensor on a chip, the effective refractive indices of optical fiber guided and SRSSP modes would not be matched. In this case, the input energy would propagate across the entire fiber waveguide, and require a high output power from the fiber.

![Fig. 1. Schematic structure of the proposed optical fiber sensor. (a) Three-dimensional view, (b) cross-sectional view in the x − y plane, and (c) longitudinal view in the y − z plane.](https://example.com/fig1.png)
region II can be expressed as a function of the length and (2) of Ref. [9], the output power \( P_{\text{out}} \) of the “TM mode” in region III at two eigenmodes in region II will couple to the output region II at in terms of the superposition of two eigenmodes in region II.

The input “TM mode” of SMF in region I can be expanded for the hybrid coupler structure in region II. Here, the HE\(_{11}\) mode with an electric component perpendicular to the metal film is referred to as “TM mode”, which is assumed as the input and output modes in regions I and III. Figures 3(a)–(d) show the calculated field patterns of two eigenmodes in region II with a 500-nm-thick detecting layer when \( n_{\text{det}} = 1.501 \). These eigenmodes with respective relative propagation constants \( \beta_{A}, \beta_{B} \) result from the opposite-phase and in-phase coupling between the individual SRSP and optical fiber guided wave modes. The widths of dielectric layer, Au film, and the detecting layer are set at 10 \( \mu \)m to reduce computational complexity. Figures 3(e)–(h) show the real and imaginary parts of the primary electric field component \( E_{x} \) of these eigenmodes with different values of \( n_{\text{det}} \) along the symmetric axis of the fiber cross-section (the dotted line in Fig. 3). The black solid profile shows that the concentration of the mode fields surrounding the Au film and fiber core are almost equal when \( n_{\text{det}} = 1.501 \) because the effective refractive indices \( \text{Re}\{n_{\text{eff}}\} \) of individual SRSP and fiber guided modes match well (Fig. 2).

For \( n_{\text{det}} = 1.481 \) and \( n_{\text{det}} = 1.400 \), \( \text{Re}\{n_{\text{eff}}\} \) of individual SRSP deviates from the crossing point, which leads to unbalanced field concentrations surrounding the Au film and the fiber core (red dashed and blue dotted curves in Figs. 3(c)–(f)).

From the eigenmode expansion method (EEM), the input “TM mode” of SMF in region I can be expanded in terms of the superposition of two eigenmodes in region II at \( z = 0 \). After propagation of length \( L \), the two eigenmodes in region II will couple to the output “TM mode” in region III at \( z = L \). From Eqs. (1) and (2) of Ref. [9], the output power \( P_{\text{out}} \) of sensing region II can be expressed as a function of the length \( L \) (Fig. 4). When the thickness of the detecting layer is fixed at 500 nm with \( n_{\text{det}} = 1.501 \), the output power declines rapidly along \( L \) with strong ripple. This oscillation indicates that the coupled energy exchanges completely between SRSP and fiber guided modes. Coupled-mode theory states that the energy transfer results from various relative propagation constants of the two eigenmodes, thereby calculating the coupling length \( L_{c} \) as \( z = L_{c} = \pi/(\beta_{A} - \beta_{B}) \). The peaks of each oscillation show linear attenuation, which result from the energy that diminishes constantly because of the high SRSP mode loss. When the refractive index of the detecting layer deviates from \( n_{\text{det}} = 1.501 \), \( P_{\text{out}} \) has a much weaker ripple and a smaller slope (red and blue lines in Fig. 4, respectively) because of the lower coupled energy to the high loss SRSP mode from the fiber guided mode.

Furthermore, the sensing characteristics can be determined from the \( P_{\text{out}} - L \) curve with different refractive indices of the detecting layer, \( n_{\text{det}} \). Figure 5 plots \( P_{\text{out}} \) against \( n_{\text{det}} \), with the sensing length fixed at \( L = 5 \times L_{c} = 1127 \mu \)m (blue solid line). \( n_{\text{det}} \) corresponding to the minimum value of \( P_{\text{out}} \) is referred to as the sensing
According to the definition in Ref. [2], the effective sensing length is evaluated for ultrathin layer, about one-eighth of wavelength, is evaluated. The resolution of the sensor for 200 nm detection is also be obtained (red and black solid lines, Fig. 5). Decreasing the thickness of detecting layer shifts the sensing center to a higher value because of the effective refractive index of detecting layer with fixed thicknesses, $h_{det}$. Figure 7 shows that by fixing the refractive index of the detecting layer at $n_{det} = 1.5$ and varying the thickness of detecting layer $h_{det}$ the sensing characteristics to $h_{det}$ can be calculated under varying Au film thicknesses ($h_m = 32, 34, and 36$ nm). Notably, that when the thickness of the Au film $h_m$ increases by 2 nm, the sensitive region of $h_{det}$ shifts by approximately 67 nm because the Re$\{n_{eff}\}$ of SRSPP mode decreases with increased thickness of the Au film$^{[21]}$. Therefore, a larger $h_{det}$ is required to increase Re$\{n_{eff}\}$ of SRSPP and match with that of the fiber guided mode. In accordance with different surrounding media and sensing centers in the practical situation of biochemical sensing, the sensitive region of the detecting layer thickness can be adjusted by varying thickness of the Au film to satisfy the requirement.

In conclusion, an optical fiber sensor based on SRSPP mode is proposed, and the sensing characteristics are theoretically analyzed. This sensor could be applicable for ultrathin layer sensing. Even for the detecting layer with thickness about one-eighth of the wavelength, the resolution of this sensor could reach up to $3.7 \times 10^{-6}$ RIU. This sensor is propitious for detection of small biochemical molecules, with a high thickness-detection sensitivity of 6.2 dB/nm. Moreover, the sensitive region of $h_{det}$ is

$$TDS = \Delta P_{out}/\Delta h_{det}. \quad (2)$$

Mean TDS is approximately 6.2 dB/nm, which is a high value for ultrathin layer detection. The ability of detecting thickness variation of tens of nanometers is crucial for biochemical sensing. Here, the antibody-antigen combination or a chemical reaction$^{[19,20]}$ always takes place on the metal surface with thickness of about tens of nanometers. Simulation results indicate that the proposed sensor is suitable for the small bio- or chemical molecule detection.

Aside from high sensitivity in ultrathin layer detection, the proposed optical fiber sensor also gives superiority in providing a flexible and adjustable sensitive region of the detecting layer thickness. Figure 7 shows that by fixing the refractive index of the detecting layer at $n_{det} = 1.5$ and varying the thickness of detecting layer $h_{det}$ the sensing characteristics to $h_{det}$ can be calculated under varying Au film thicknesses ($h_m = 32, 34, and 36$ nm). Notably, that when the thickness of the Au film $h_m$ increases by 2 nm, the sensitive region of $h_{det}$ shifts by approximately 67 nm because the Re$\{n_{eff}\}$ of SRSPP mode decreases with increased thickness of the Au film$^{[21]}$. Therefore, a larger $h_{det}$ is required to increase Re$\{n_{eff}\}$ of SRSPP and match with that of the fiber guided mode. In accordance with different surrounding media and sensing centers in the practical situation of biochemical sensing, the sensitive region of the detecting layer thickness can be adjusted by varying thickness of the Au film to satisfy the requirement.

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Around the sensing center $n_{det} = 1.785$, the average resolution is about $3.7 \times 10^{-6}$ RIU in range of $\Delta n_{det} \sim 0.01$. The resolution of optical fiber SPP biosensor based on spectral interrogation is currently about $10^{-6}$ RIU for detecting the refractive index of a bulk substance$^{[14,15]}$. The proposed sensor based on intensity interrogation can achieve a rather high resolution even for ultrathin layer detection.

For biochemical sensing, the reaction between an antibody and an antigen may be viewed as a model for tuning the thickness of an ultrathin detecting layer with fixed refractive index$^{[16-18]}$. Therefore, the sensing characteristics of the sensor are studied according to the actual situation. As the refractive index of most biomolecules range from 1.4 to 1.7, the refractive index of the detecting layer $n_{det}$ is fixed at 1.5. Figure 6 shows that $P_{out}$ varies with $h_{det}$ in the range of 450–550 nm, which indicates that a change of 5 nm in $h_{det}$ around 500 nm corresponds to a change of about 30 dB in $P_{out}$. Similar to Ref. [10], the thickness-detection sensitivity (TDS) is defined as the variation of $P_{out}$ over the corresponding change of $h_{det}$:

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Fig. 7. Output power $P_{\text{out}}$ (in dBm) as a function of the detecting layer thickness $h_{\text{det}}$ labeled under different thicknesses of the Au film $h_m$. This can be easily extended by adjusting the structural parameters. All these properties allow the proposed sensor to be potentially useful as a compact and portable biochemical sensing system.

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